No. 264 / FEBRUARY 1995

THE NI
NEW INTERNATIONALIST

Ageing with attitude

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The **New Internationalist** magazine is published by New Internationalist Publications Ltd which is wholly owned by the New Internationalist Trust and co-operatively run by: *Vanessa Baird, Chris Brazier, Wayne Ellwood, Nikki van der Gaag, Fran Harvey, Alan Hughes, Gill Moore, Ian Nixon, Clive Offley, David Ransom, James Rowland, Richard Swift, Dexter Tiranti, Alison Ware, Troth Wells, Michael York.*

The **New Internationalist** magazine was founded by Peter and Lesley Adamson in 1970.

SUBSCRIPTION ENQUIRIES

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SUBSCRIPTION OFFICES AND ANNUAL PRICES

UK: PO Box 79, Hertford, SG14 1AQ Tel. (01992) 822899
Individuals £22.70 p.a.; £6.30 qtly. Institutions £45

Canada: 35 Riviera Drive, Unit 17, Markham, Ontario L3R 8N4. Tel. (905) 946-0407 Fax. (905) 946-0410
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EDITORIAL AND ADVERTISING OFFICES

UK: 55 Rectory Road, Oxford OX4 1BW. Tel. (0865) 728181. Fax. (0865) 793152. [Advertising: Tel. (0384) 373421. Fax. (0384) 441904]

Canada: 1011 Bloor Street West, Toronto, Ontario M6H 1M1. Tel. (416) 588 6478. Fax: (416) 537 6435.

Australia: 7 Hutt Street, Adelaide, S.A. 5000. Tel. (08) 2321563

MAILINGS

Occasionally we allow organizations to mail our subscribers. If you do not wish to receive their material please write to your subscription office.

The **NI** is printed by Cradley Print Ltd, Warley, West Midlands, UK.

The **NI** is distributed to the UK news trade by COMAG Specialist Division, Mercury Centre, Central Way, Feltham, Middlesex TW14 0RX. Tel. (081) 844 1000. Fax. (081) 751 2666.

The **NI** in North America (USPS 329-770) is published monthly by **New Internationalist Publications**, 1011 Bloor Street West, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M6H 1M1. Publications Contract 101400. Postage Paid at Toronto. US 2nd class postage paid at Lewiston, NY (USPS 329-770). US Post-master send address changes to: **New Internationalist**, PO Box 1143, Lewiston, NY 14092.

Indexed in the Canadian Periodical Index, CPI CD-ROM, CPI Online, the Canadian Magazine Index, CBCA OnDisc and the Alternative Press Index.

Syndication/Permissions: Sonja Singleton, Cover Stories, The Guardian, 119 Farringdon Road, London EC1, UK.Tel: 071 278 2332. Fax: 071 837 1192.

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Roger Cooper, April 1991

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FRONT COVER PHOTO: FAMILY IN CHILLICOTHE, OHIO, US.
ELI REED/MAGNUM MAGAZINE DESIGNED BY **ALAN HUGHES**

THIS MONTH'S **THEME**

Ageing

FROM THIS MONTH'S **EDITOR**

My great-aunt Marjorie celebrates her 100th birthday this month. It seems more than chance that she and I have both been writing and thinking about ageing at the same time. Marjorie has just written and published her memoirs, and I have been working on this magazine. Marjorie's story covers things which for me are just part of history – and dim and distant history at that. She writes of Queen Victoria's funeral procession, the end of the Boer War, the outbreak of the First World War. She writes too of the days before cars or aeroplanes, of travelling around in 'dogcarts' and carriages.

Her life has been rich and varied, but perhaps the most astonishing thing about it for me has always been her refusal to let age stop her doing what she wanted.

As a young woman, she was educated in South Africa, and came back to England to be trained as a singer. During the Second World War she worked in a munitions factory. Then, like so many women, she became a 'carer' and looked after her ailing mother for many years.

When her mother died, Marjorie was already in her sixties. But a different kind of life then opened up for her. She took a Landrover by boat to South Africa and drove it, sometimes accompanied, sometimes alone, to Zambia. There she met and later married my great-uncle. During the following 20 years they travelled extensively – often camping in a tent. She rode a camel and an elephant for the first time in her seventies, and when they subsequently 'retired', it was to found a church in Spain. My memory of them there as a child is of climbing the mountain behind their home and struggling to keep up as they strode on ahead.

My great-uncle is now dead and Marjorie lives on her own in Surrey, having returned to the UK shortly after her 90th birthday. She cannot now do all the things she would like as her eyesight is not good and she is physically frail. But she maintains a sense of humour about the whole business of ageing. On her failing sight: 'There are advantages even in having bad eyesight. If I could see, then I would have to look at myself in the mirror every day. And I would see that I was nearly 100. As I don't feel any different than I did when I was younger I think this would be quite a shock!' Lack of sight does not prevent her continuing interest in what goes on in the world, and she is often more up-to-date than I am.

I am sorry that her eyesight means she will not be able to see this issue. In it we unveil a new ***NI** Interview* section and Alan Hughes has redesigned the magazine to give it a fresh look. It seems rather appropriate that an issue on the old should be the first to have a new design.

But at least Marjorie will be able to hear it on tape. She has dedicated her book 'To the next generation'. I would like to dedicate this magazine to her.

Nikki van der Gaag

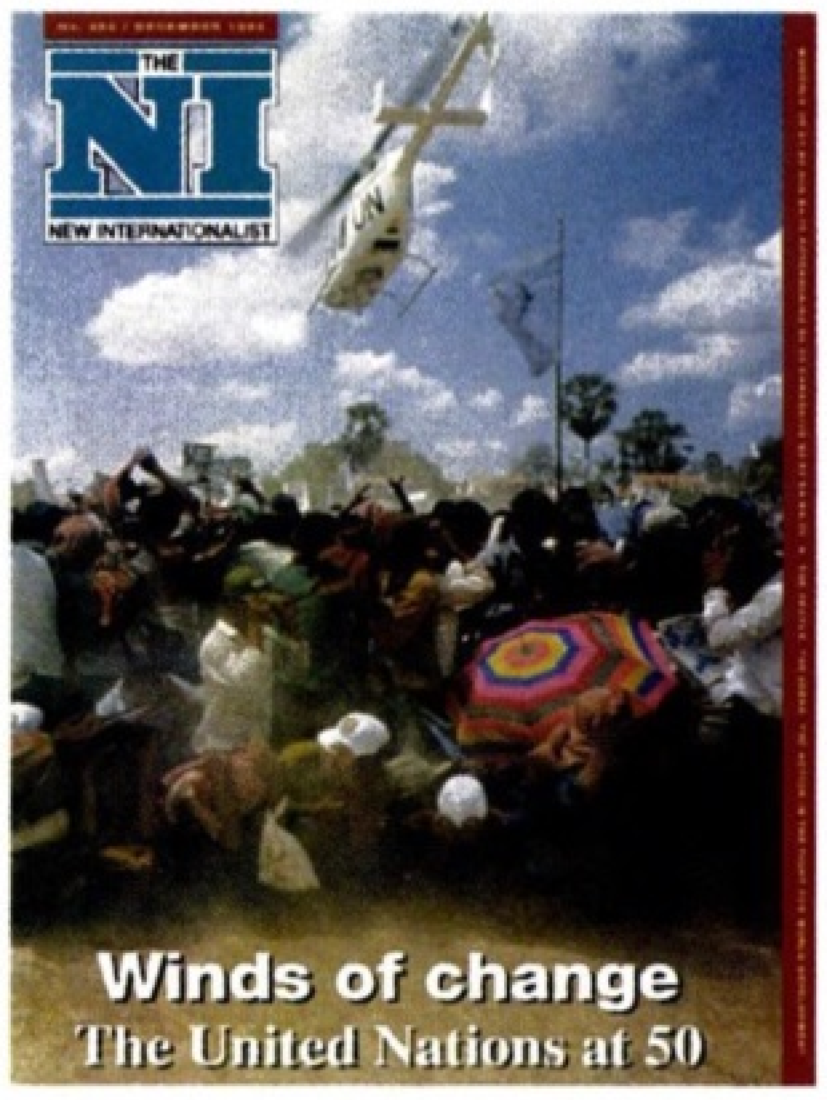
Nikki van der Gaag
*for the **New Internationalist** Co-operative*

Letters

The New Internationalist welcomes your letters. But please keep them short. They may be edited for purposes of space or clarity. Include a home telephone number if possible and send your letters to the nearest editorial office. The address is inside the front cover.

Backwater kids

I read with interest and some amusement your end-of-term report (**NI 262**) on a number of UN agencies including the International Labour Organization (ILO). As with most headteachers, however, you have rather a selective view of what is going on in the classroom. School bullies and assertive middle-class kids get noticed but us quiet, diligent and clever working-class kids never manage to catch your attention.



So the ILO is an inconsequential backwater? Is this the same ILO that has just had a major debate within the UN system on the 'social clause'; that is at the centre of preparations for next year's UN Social Summit; that has the biggest programme in the UN on child labour; that is about to produce a report on the global crisis in employment; and which is also quietly getting on with putting into place international regulations on health and safety so that we have no more Bhopals? Perhaps the Headteacher ought to do a little homework?

Peter Brannen
Director of ILO UK
London, England

Liberia's war

There are no indications on the map in your issue on ***The Arms Trade*** (**NI 261**) of the civil war in Liberia which has been going on for nearly five years. One and a half million Liberians have been displaced or made refugees in Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire. There are approximately 60,000 combatants fighting on various sides of up to seven warring factions. Many belong to so-called 'small boys units'.

The sad fact is that Liberia is at the point of complete disintegration and collapse as a nation, and the war is spilling over into Sierra Leone.

Bernt Karlsson
Caritas
Stockholm, Sweden

Evil gusts

I write to complain about the subtitle of Elizabeth Obadina's *Letter from Lagos* (**NI 262**). She describes quite objectively two examples of paranormal happenings and you say she 'reveals a new tendency to blame all ills on the supernatural' before we start to read.

I am no student of the paranormal but you have to be deaf and blind to deny its existence. Modern science is very dismissive of areas outside its scope.

Have you never been hit by a gust of pure evil? Not even a tinge of quite illogical abhorrence?

Please let us keep open minds and not prejudice our readers.

Lawrence Page
Bushey, England

Hard line

After reading your *Update* on the Nestlé baby milk scandal (**NI 261**), I thought you might like to know how Nestlé run their operations in England.

A patient of mine works at Macintosh's, which was taken over by Nestlé two years ago. She's worked there for years and always enjoyed it – before the take-over.

The new management stopped all talking on the line, banned 'toilet breaks' and limited tea-breaks to 15 minutes, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. It takes 15 minutes to get to the canteen. The women are all understandably depressed and would leave if there were any other work available.

Then one Friday, last month, a 50-year-old woman collapsed with a heart-attack while working on the line. An ambulance was called, but no other concessions were made – she lay on the stone floor for 20 minutes while the line continued. The woman ordered to take her place had to keep stepping over her until the ambulance arrived. The really disturbing thing about this was the way in which my patient related the tale, with a kind of resigned acceptance that this is the way things are now.

I shall certainly never buy any Nestlé product again, unless by accident.

Carrie Clare
Halifax, England

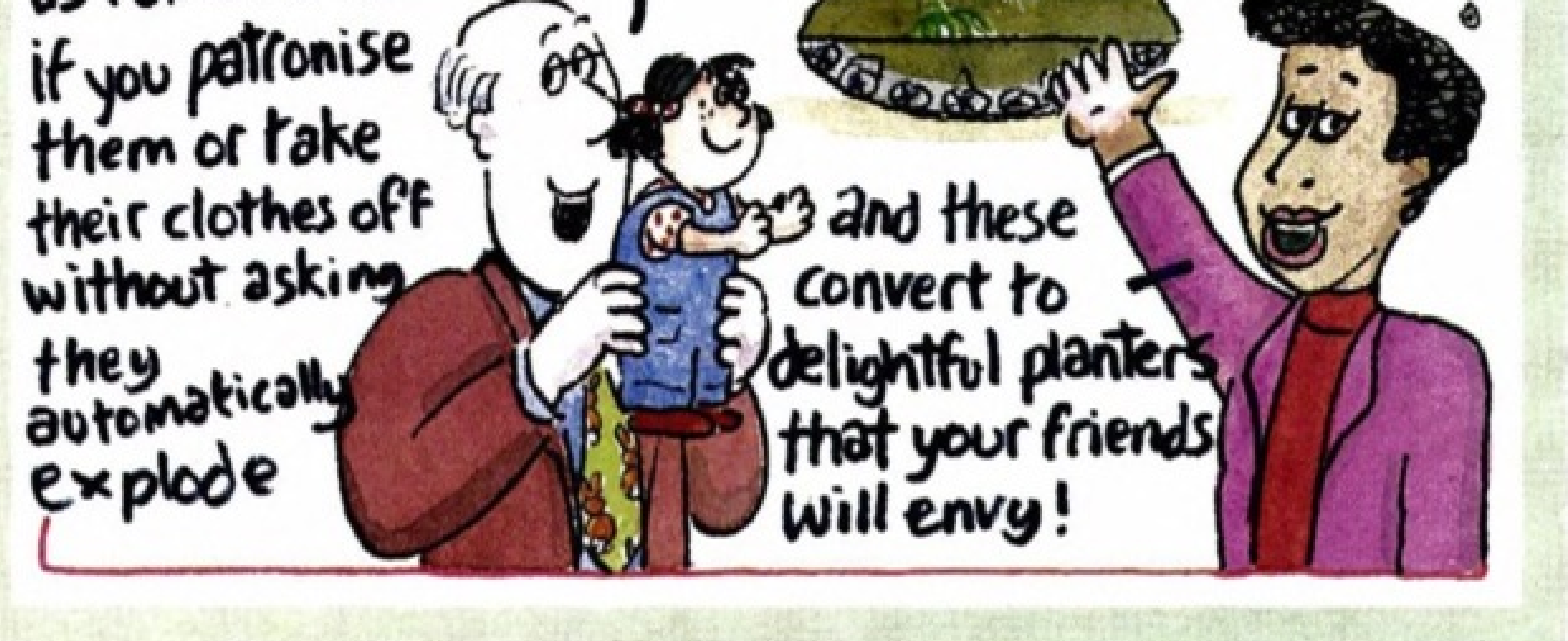
Arms conversion

Whilst welcoming your magazine on the *Arms Trade* (**NI 261**) we believe that the industrial and economic arguments surrounding the issues were perhaps not given the same attention as the moral ones.

Cuts in arms spending are a reality and the reductions require proper management. While the global market for armaments is currently worth over $25 billion, it is expected to decrease by 20 per cent in the next five years. The defence industry in Europe is already decreasing at a rate of over 50,000 jobs per annum.

There is a possibility for diversification into new emerging civil products and markets such as the growing market for socially-useful and environmentally-friendly high-tech products. The Arms Conversion Project believes this possibility should become a reality. For more information write to the Arms Conversion Project, City of Glasgow, Town Clerk's Office, City Chambers, Glasgow G2 1DU, Scotland.

Ian S Goudie
Arms Conversion Project
Glasgow, Scotland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UK not OK

I am writing to ask you a question which has bothered me ever since I first started subscribing. Why if a letter-writer writes from Wales and Scotland is this followed by 'UK'? If a letter comes from England the place is just followed by 'UK'. Why is 'UK' necessary at all? Surely not because of some ethnocentric notion that everyone knows England's geography better than other parts of Britain?

Oighrig Park
Glasgow, Scotland

Ed: we have been deliberating this for some while and your letter has prompted a decision! We will from now on omit 'UK' from all letters.

Desert rain

I was taken aback by David Ransom's first keynote sentence: 'No rain ever falls on the starkly-beautiful Atacama desert of northern Chile'

(*Filthy Rich!* **NI 259**). I travelled there in 1991 and woke up in the coach amidst a torrential rainstorm north of Copiapó. It certainly does rain in the desert, albeit rarely, for without the rain there would not be the beautiful but brief flowering of desert flora of which Chileans speak so fondly.

Such flowers, like the copper and nitrates to be found within the desert, are part of Chile's diverse range of resources and *patrimonio nacional.* Sold to (or stolen by) the British and the Americans in the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries, the national copper company Codelco sought to readjust the balance of ownership and production of these resources.

It is a sad return to Chile's dependent history that the current Frei administration is looking to privatize parts of Codelco, selling to the new Guggenheims. *Plus ça change...*

Jonathan Barton
London, England

Brandon 'gagged'

Your readers will know of Brandon Astor Jones, a Death Row prisoner in Georgia, US, who had two excellent articles published in the *New Internationalist* recently **(NI 259** and **NI 260).**

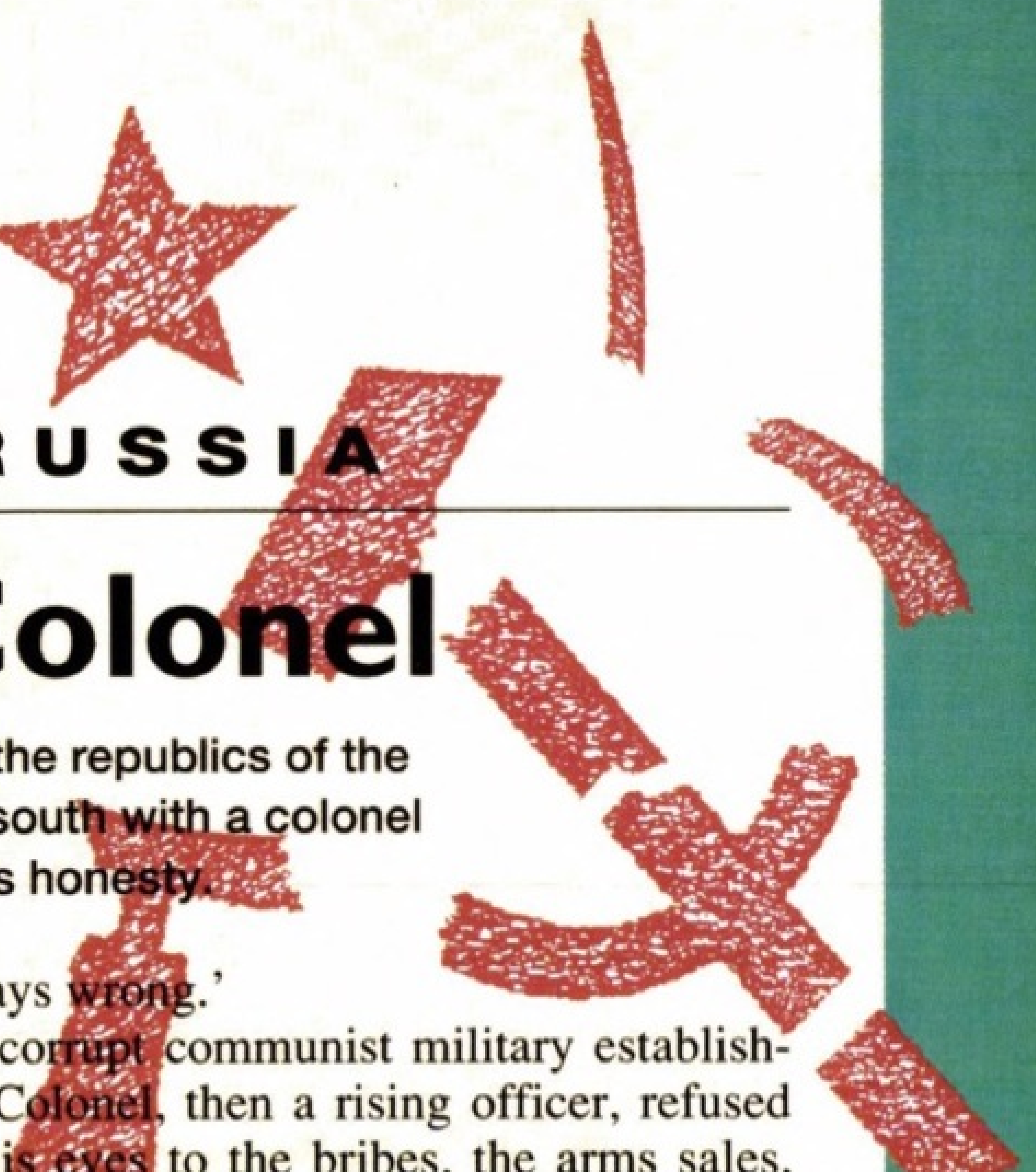
They will be sorry to learn that as a result of these articles and others, the prison authorities of the Georgia Diagnostic and Classification Center are currently withholding Mr Jones's mail and effectively 'gagging' him. The withholding of mail is illegal under US law.

Brandon would appreciate the help of your readers in writing letters to the Governor of Georgia, urging him to restore to Brandon the right to receive and send out personal mail. The address is: The Hon. Zell Miller, Governor of Georgia, 203 State Capitol, Atlanta GA 30334, US.

We need hundreds of letters, please.

Stephanie Wilkinson
Seven Hills, Australia

The views expressed on the letters page are not necessarily those of the New Internationalist.



LETTER FROM **RUSSIA**

The honest Colonel

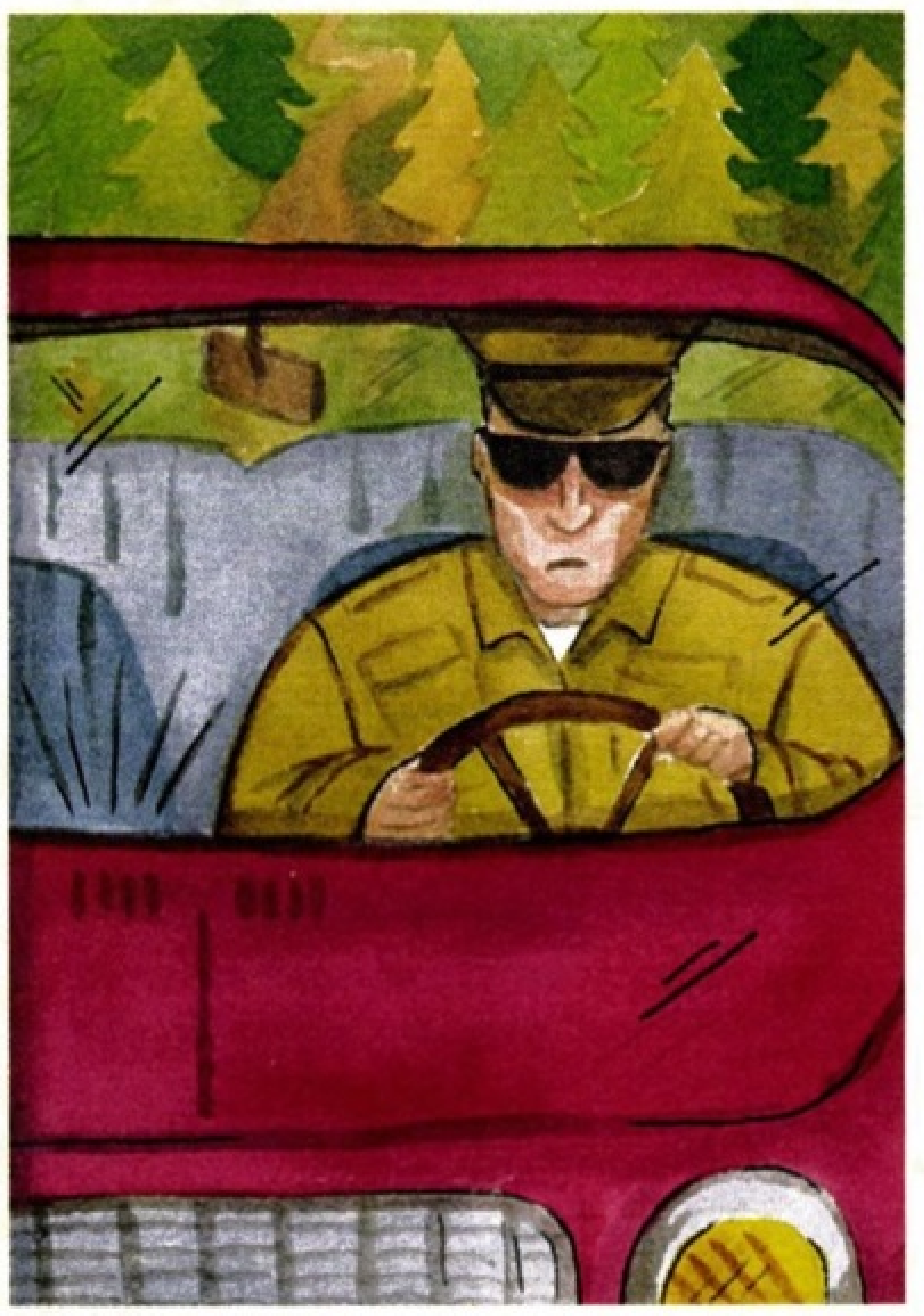
In the first of a new series of letters from the republics of the former Soviet Union, Olivia Ward travels south with a colonel who paid the price of exile for his honesty.

THE Colonel was proud of his American tape-player and he hummed to it softly as we lumbered along the dust-choked roads to a village not even the locals could identify. He spoke no English, but something in the song on his tape appealed to him. Above the wheeze of truck engines, a gritty American voice sang about freedom, the loneliness of the open road and the courage to strike out for the unknown.

In profile, the Colonel's rugged tanned face with its jet-pilot sunglasses was a mirror-image of the US military officers who inspire troops and win invitations to run for Congress. Their sports-clad blonde wives look at them with unflagging admiration. They live in glass houses and throw no stones.

Life has not worked that way for the Colonel. His home is half a one-roomed flat in a sleepy provincial town, his wife struggles for survival in another country and his only brush with politics was at the sharp end of a Russian Government tank.

It was there that the Colonel and I met, or narrowly escaped meeting, in October 1993. We stood on the embankment facing the Russian White House as tank fire blasted blazing holes in the masonry and bullets whined in the bushes.



ALISON MORETON

I was waiting for the inevitable surrender of the rebellion leader to round up a long day's story. But the Colonel had come too late for the hopeless task of saving the Parliament, and was waiting for nothing.

Now, a year later, by a quirk of fate the two of us were face to face in the south of Russia in the Colonel's sturdy Lada. The officer who had commanded soldiers in every hot-spot of the former Soviet Union was driving a journalist to visit a remote army settlement for more money than he had ever seen in a military paycheque.

Three years after his discharge, one month short of his 25-year service, the Colonel was still wearing military fatigues. He could not separate himself from the institution that was his pride, his shame and his torment.

'One tried to be honest but honesty is not a requirement,' he said quietly. 'When they told me to take charge of a unit, to impose order, I thought they meant to apply human standards. I was always wrong.'

In the corrupt communist military establishment the Colonel, then a rising officer, refused to close his eyes to the bribes, the arms sales, the drunkenness and barbaric cruelty. He joined the Communist Party in the vain hope that tapping the ideological source would give him strength. When he found out the truth he was expelled for insubordination.

But he paid his dues to a system that existed as a shimmering mirage, always beyond his grasp. His honest reputation worked against him. He was thrown from the deserts of Mongolia to the barrens of Siberia. To Afghanistan, Central Asia, then Moldova, where his family was stuck with no money to move and nowhere to go.

The wounds of his service still smarting, the Colonel felt a great rage wash over him. Democracy had solved nothing. The days and months spent alone in the southern backwater, patiently waiting his turn for a military flat that always went to somebody with better connections, exploded inside his head.

He still had his strength, and a gun.

'I thought the country would have one last chance for justice,' he said. 'But when I looked into the faces of the people who were trying to take over, I saw the same old chronic sickness.'

Now he has locked up his gun. There is nothing to save or defend, he says. But his name has been put on a list of enemies of the Government and he is regularly questioned by local police.

'I'm fooling myself that I'll get an apartment,' he says with a wry smile. 'The only way is bribery and I wouldn't pay if I had the money. All I have left is my honor, the honor of a military man.'

That, he said, is worth the dust that was seeping in through the car windows. He twisted the switch of the tape deck.

'Do you mind if I play the song again?'

The American voice rose. 'Nobody understands me bein' so alone, but I know I'm headed home. Somewhere's the freedom road.'

We all sang. ■

Olivia Ward is the Moscow bureau chief of the *Toronto Star.*

Update

TOURISM

Human zoo

Neck-ringing refugees

A NEW and disturbing tourist attraction has appeared on the troubled border between Burma and Thailand. Ma Nang has been winding brass rings onto the necks of young Padaung women for 34 years. Mostly she has worked in Burma, but for the last five years she has lived in one of two 'tourist villages' in Mae Hong Son province, Thailand.

There are many refugee camps along the Thai-Burmese border. Since 1962 an estimated 1.5 million people have fled the oppression of Burma's military dictatorship. The Thai Government has been a reluctant host to many of them.

But the Padaung were actively encouraged to cross the border. The Thais benefit from the extra income generated by the influx of tourists to the region. At the 'tourist villages' there is an entrance fee. The Padaung women receive some of the revenue but most is taken by Karens, of whom the Padaung are a sub-group. The money helps pay for the struggle against the Burmese Government.

Traditionally the Padaung women wear brass neck-rings which give the appearance of elongating the wearer's neck (in fact they depress the collarbone). The neck-rings can be removed, but the weakened neck muscles are unable to support the weight of the head – to do so without help would result in the windpipe being crushed.

Inside Burma the tradition has been dying. Women would even cross into Thailand to have the rings removed in hospital, where they would need to wait months for their necks to recover. Now, due to the 'tourist villages', the practice has been given an extended lease of life.

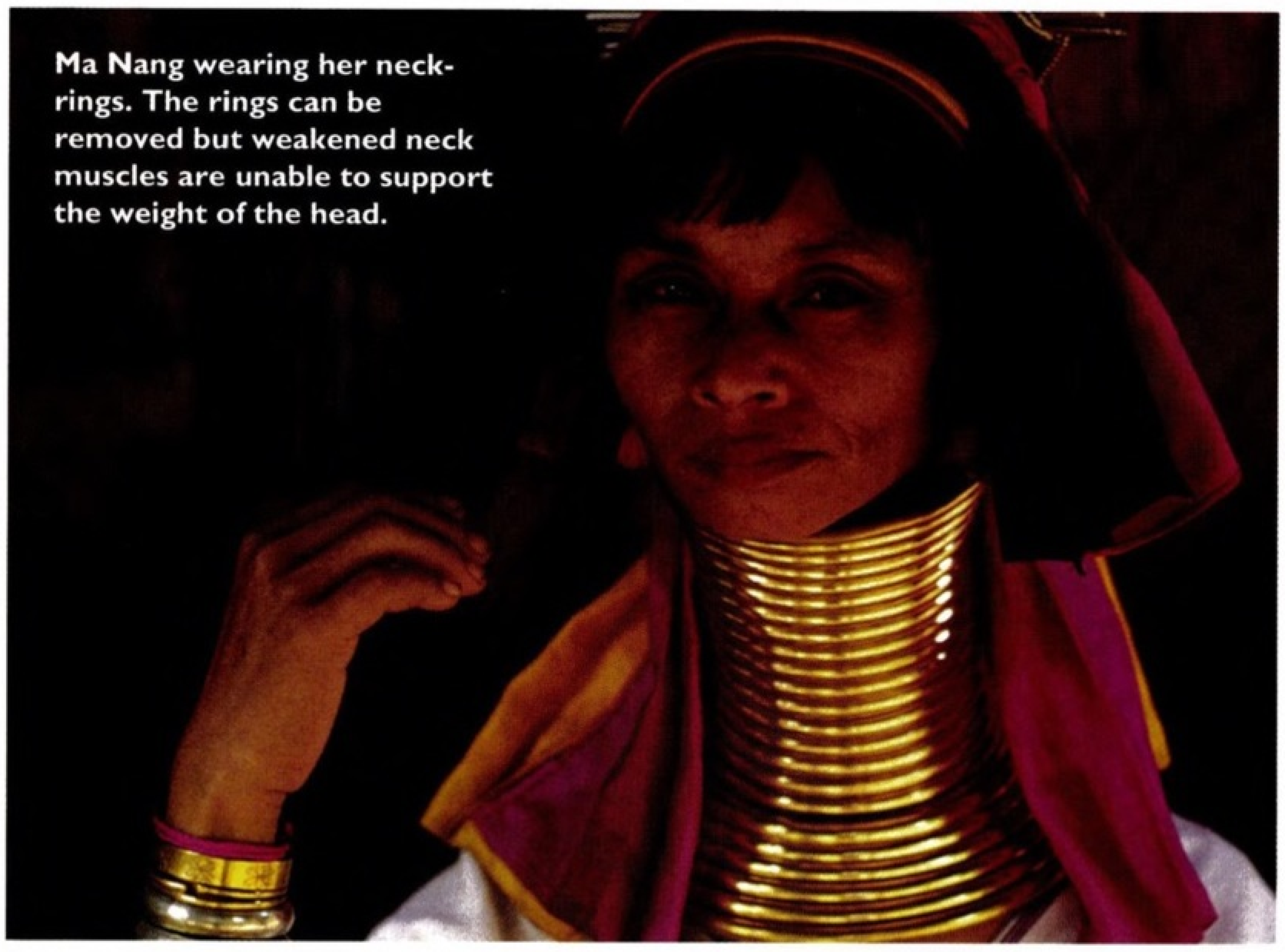
Ma Nang explained a significant change in the application of the rings since her arrival in Thailand. In Burma a girl child wears her first rings, weighing one kilo, at the age of five. Two more rings are added at 10 and 15 and another two be-fore the age of 20, to make a total of five.

This process takes too long to sustain the main attraction to the 'tourist villages'. So the process has been speeded up – the first ring worn at the age of five, the second at eight, the third at 13 and the final two by the time the girl is 15.

Inside the camps the women sit at the front of their wooden huts making bracelets, woven bags and dolls to sell to tourists, stopping to pose for the cameras. When asked about the tedium of her life Ma Nang says: 'What do you do? I'm sure your work too must be boring sometimes. This is just the same – a job to earn money.'

Even so, other Padaung women have opted to live in the harsher conditions of the regular Karen refugee camps rather than submit to this practice. ■

Marcus Rose

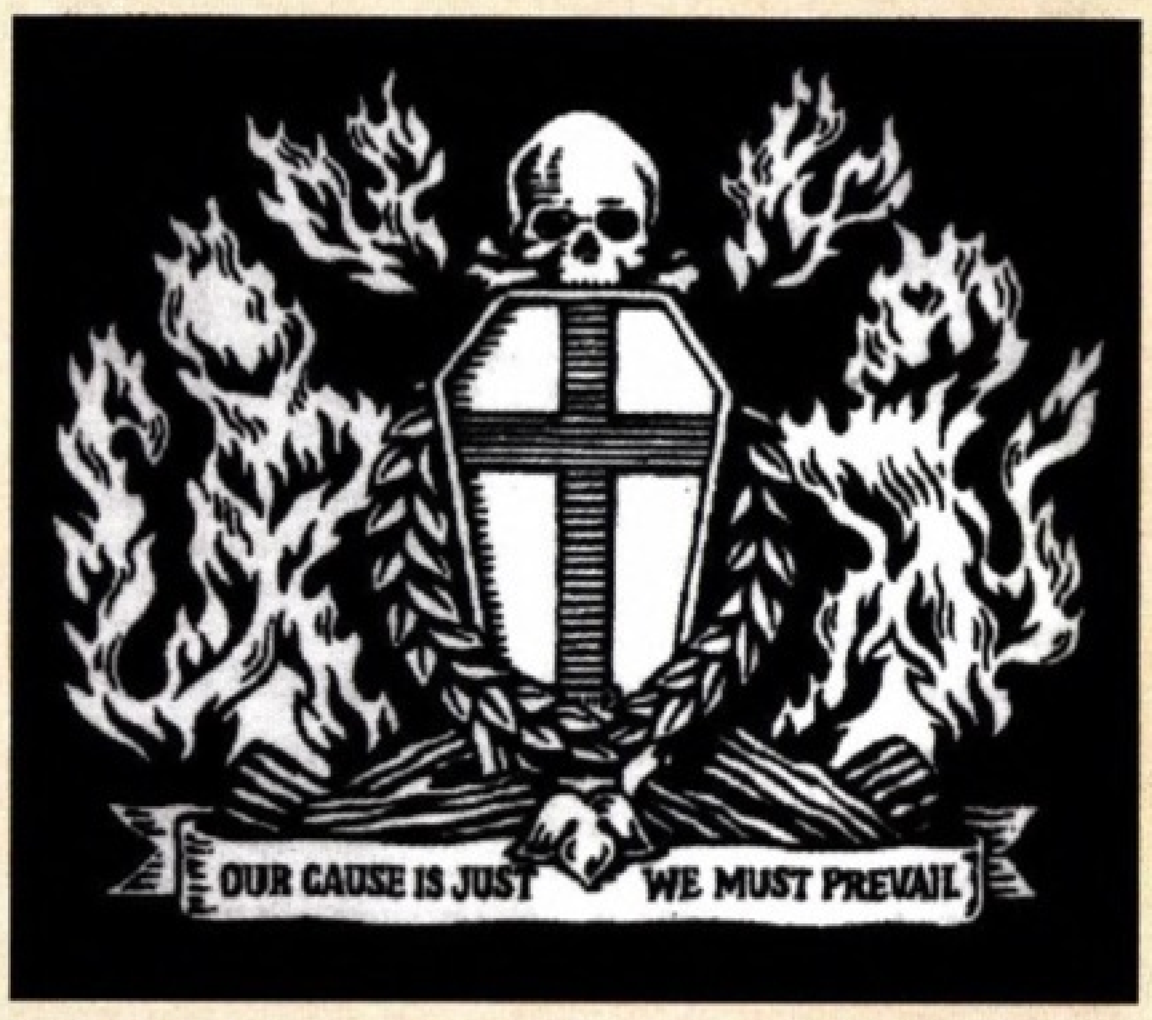


Ma Nang wearing her neck-rings. The rings can be removed but weakened neck muscles are unable to support the weight of the head.

MARCUS ROSE

Death direct

A company that sells cigarettes and 'shag' rolling tobacco under the – at least – honest brand name of 'Death' has found a European Union loophole that enables it to circumvent tax duties imposed by the British Government. Captain Black Ltd promises to deliver Death to British consumers at half cost by supplying the tobacco from Luxembourg at duty-free European prices. It may be difficult for a government that derives large tax revenues from duties on tobacco and refuses to restrict cigarette advertising targeted at children, to take a high moral stance on this one.



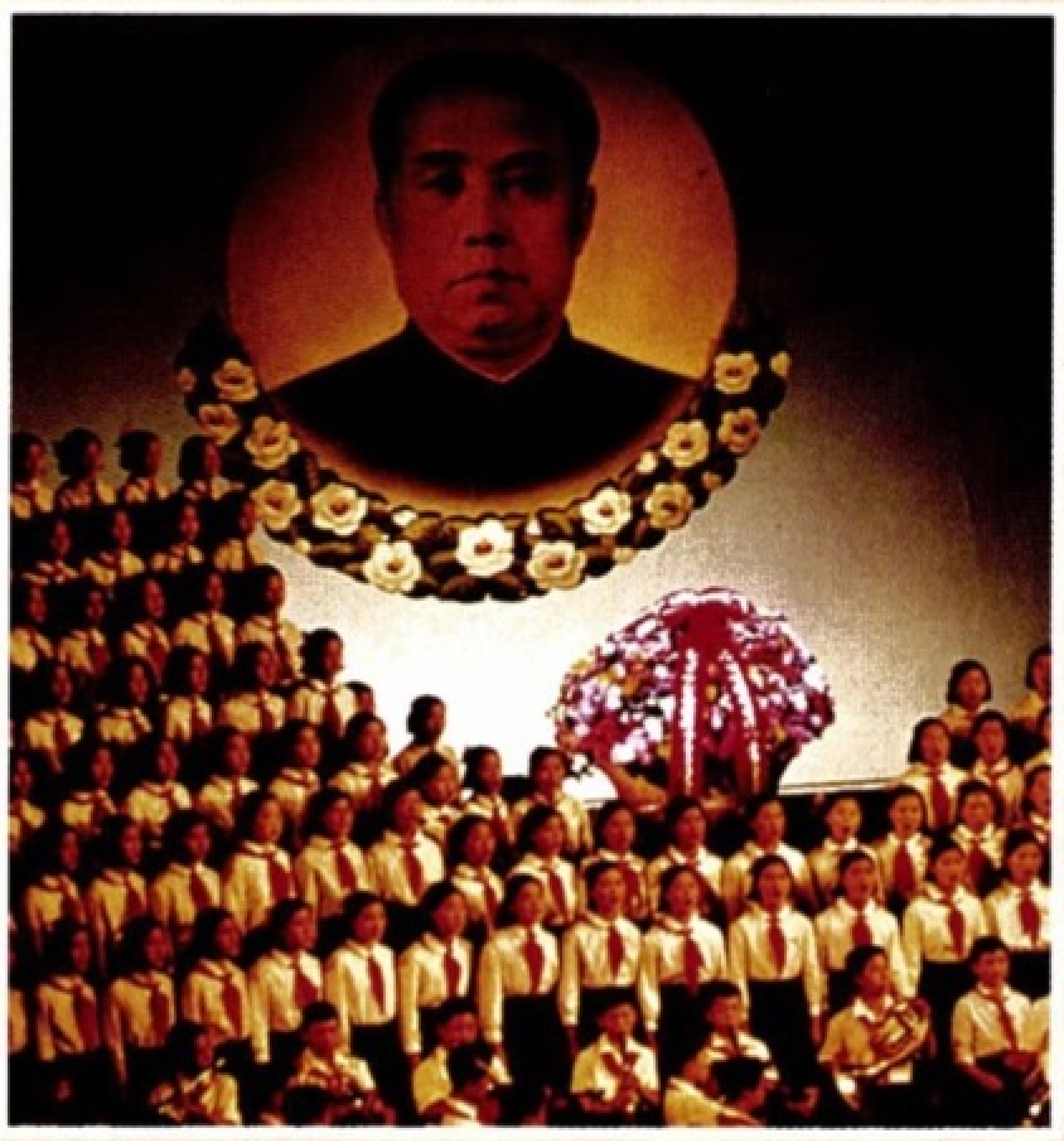
Honest emblem: tobacco company's promise.

Captain Black Ltd press release

Bargain embalming

When Russian morticians were selected for the task of preserving the mortal remains of North Korea's Great Leader Kim Il Sung, international soothsayers carefully studied the geopolitical entrails to try and find out what this might mean. Why turn to Moscow for expertise and not to Beijing or Hanoi?

All three capitals have a reputation for state-of-the-art embalming with an impressive backlist of modern mummies including Lenin, Stalin, 'Uncle' Ho Chi Minh and Mao Zedong. But the main clue may lie in the price tag. At $300,000 the Russians came in with a low-ball bid.



KCNA / CAMERA PRESS

Eternalizing Kim: body politic or body economic?

World Press Review Vol 41, no 12

The sneakier sex?

'Do women make better spies than men?' asks New Delhi's *Times of India*. They certainly seem to be on the increase. Britain, for example, now has more female than male agents in its security service, MI5, which is headed by a woman, Stella Rimington. During *perestroika* Katya Mayorava held a highly visible position in the KGB. And in the US female agents have recently been challenging institutional sexual discrimination within the CIA.

World Press Review Vol 41, no 12.

The fall of poets

Poets used to be as popular as rock stars in Russia. Fans used to fill sports arenas to attend emotional poetry recitals by bards such as Yevgeny Yevtushenko. Others – who struggled with the censors – commanded underground audiences. Not now. Ironically, poetry has come under a kind of capitalist repression from publishers who don't want to bother with it, according to Moscow's liberal *Izvestia*. Konstantin Kedrov writes: 'If Yevtushenko has to run around the bookstores to distribute his books, then what hope is there for anyone else?'

Steven Shabad, World Press Review Vol 41, no 12.

CAMERA PRESS

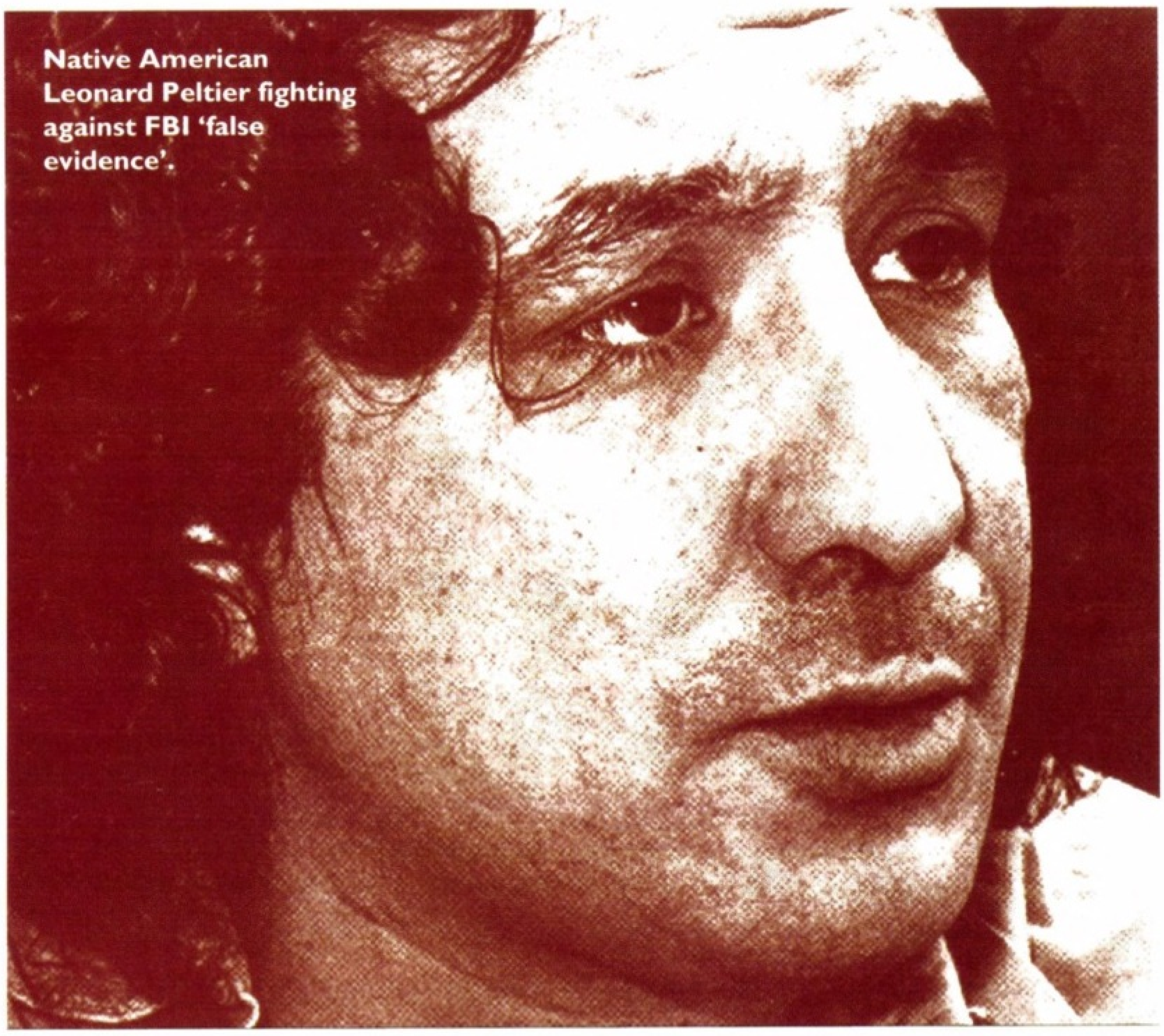
Even Yevtushenko gets the brush-off.

All for a strawberry yoghurt

A German study has found that to produce a 150-gram pot of yoghurt and get it to a distribution outlet in south Germany, ingredients were transported from Poland, from the Netherlands, and from north, west and east Germany. The manufacturer of the aluminium cover for the jar, for example, was 300 kilometres away. Not surprisingly, the truck emerged as the main polluter. Driving one truckload of 150-gram strawberry yoghurts to a distribution outlet in southern Germany would result in more than 10,000 litres of diesel being burned, emitting nitrogen oxides, sulphur dioxide and other toxic contaminants into the air.

Safe Alliance Newsletter
38 Ebury Street, London SW1W OLU, England

NATIVE PEOPLES



Native American Leonard Peltier fighting against FBI 'false evidence'.

Framed

Suspect case against jailed activist

THE two-decade-long fight by Native American Indian activist Leonard Peltier to clear his name may be about to enter a new phase. Peltier, a feisty 50-year-old Lakota-Chippewa, is serving two consecutive life sentences (50 years) in Leavenworth Prison, Kansas for the alleged murder in 1975 of two FBI agents in the United States.

Soon after the shootings Peltier fled to Canada and immediately sought political asylum. Washington asked for a quick extradition and it wasn't long before Peltier was back in a US courtroom. Now, after years of pressure from human-rights campaigners, the Canadian Government has finally agreed to review its decision to extradite.

Was Peltier framed? It seems likely. When it became clear that there was insufficient evidence to charge him and thus no basis for his extradition, the FBI set about concocting it.

The case was based on two affidavits sworn by Myrtle Poor Bear, an Indian woman with a history of mental illness. She signed conflicting affidavits saying she saw Peltier shoot two FBI agents on the Pine Ridge reservation. The affidavits were obtained only after the Canadian prosecutor told the FBI there was insufficient evidence to extradite Peltier. Poor Bear recanted her testimony and the US prosecutors subsequently admitted it was unreliable. According to Peltier supporters all the remaining evidence is circumstantial, simply proving he was in the region where the crime was committed.

There is also reason to believe the FBI and the US Justice Department knew they were presenting false evidence to the Canadian court. In 1978 the US Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals said the submission of evidence was 'to say the least a clear abuse of the investigative process of the FBI'.

Peltier supporters are hoping the recent Canadian decision to allow the Parliamentary Justice Committee to review the case will finally force the US Government to face up to FBI 'dirty tricks' and at last release one of America's most celebrated political prisoners. ■

Alan Hughes

For more information contact: **The Leonard Peltier Defense Committee, 43 Chandler Drive, Scarborough, Ontario, Canada M1G 1Z1.**

Update

DEVELOPMENT AID

Aid for arms scandal

Landmark victory for campaigners

IAN BERRY / MAGNUM

Malaysia's playboy Prime Minister Mahathir won $351 million of British aid money.

A CAMPAIGN group has taken the British Government to court for misusing overseas-aid money – and won. The High Court declared illegal the Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd's grant of $351 million aid to the Pergau Dam in Malaysia. The action, brought by the London-based World Development Movement, was the first ever legal challenge to the Government's spending on overseas aid.

Throughout 1994 the Pergau Dam was at the centre of a political storm as the financing of it several years earlier had been linked to an arms sale to Malaysia. The then Secretary of State for Defence, George Younger, had signed a document promising aid worth 20 per cent of a 1.5 billion-dollar arms order. As a result, $351 million of scarce aid was being squandered on a hydroelectric dam in relatively wealthy Malaysia – as much as was given in 1991-92 to all the world's 47 least developed countries.

The World Development Movement argued that Douglas Hurd had not granted aid according to the criteria set out by 1980 Overseas Development and Co-operation Act. This states that aid should be given for 'the purpose of promoting the development or maintaining the economy of a country or territory outside the UK, or the welfare of its people.'

Tim Lankester, a top aid official at the time, had advised that the dam was 'uneconomic' and 'not... a sound development project'. It was given the go-ahead by Hurd because of 'wider considerations' such as the 'interests of British industry'. Hurd stated that this was his right as Foreign Secretary.

But as Lord Justice Ross remarked: 'If Parliament intended to confer payments for unsound development purposes it could have been expected to say so expressly.'

It isn't clear how the Government will sort out the financial mess. The judges ordered the Government to 'unravel' the illegally-spent aid and gave the World Development Movement the power to return to court if not satisfied with the formula proposed. The victory was a landmark legal decision for British citizens' groups.

The Government is now under renewed pressure to explain why eight major buyers of British arms have enjoyed boosted aid over the past decade – at a time when some of the world's poorest countries have seen their aid fall under the knife. For example, Oman, the third largest buyer of British arms, receives more aid per head than Ethiopia – despite being richer than an aid donor like Portugal. Similarly, British aid to Indonesia – a major arms buyer – has tripled, despite its well-documented human-rights abuses. Pergau may be only the tip of the iceberg. ■

Harriet Lamb

World Development Movement can be contacted at **25, Beehive Place, London SW9 7QR, England. Tel: 071 274 7630.**

Bean bandits

Activists are opposing a biotechnology company that is seeking patent control over the soybean. The company Agrecetus Inc – owned by US agro-giant WR Grace and Co – was awarded a European patent in March 1994 to cover all forms of genetically-engineered soybean plants and seeds, irrespective of the genes used or the transformation technique employed. The company has also applied for a sweeping patent in Canada and the US.

'A patent granting a single corporation monopoly control over genetic research on one of the world's most important food crops – soybeans – is a threat to world food security and demonstrates that the patent system is recklessly out of control. The soybean patent is technically flawed and morally unacceptable – and it must be revoked,' said Patrick Mooney, director of Rural Advancement Foundation International which has filed its opposition to the patent at the European Patent Office.

RAFI, Suite 504-71 Bank St, Ottawa,
Ont. KIP 5N2, Canada.

Breastmilk bank

SUE DARLOW / FORMAT

Bombay city authorities have created a pioneering breastmilk bank in a hospital close to the huge shanty town of Dharavi. Because of its unique nutritional and immunological qualities, breastmilk is extremely important for babies in the first months of their lives. Health officials estimate that more than 1,000 babies die in India each year because they don't get enough of it.

In the first year of the new Bombay scheme 500 babies will be provided with donated milk. The hospital will be drawing primarily on supplies from nursing mothers in its own wards, then from other donors. But this increases the danger that poverty-stricken women may be tempted to sell their breastmilk in order to feed the rest of their families.

Sudhirendar Sharma, Panos

Quote

"I don't want to see a new personality cult develop. When we set up democracy here we need to base it on solid principles, not on individual persons. What is needed at the base is a spirit and will for reconciliation..."

Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of Burma's democracy movement and Nobel Peace Prize winner. Since 1989 she has been held under house arrest by the Burmese Military Junta, in spite of her landslide victory in the 1990 elections.

Ageing with attitude

Human beings are living longer and longer. At the same time, prejudice against older people is getting stronger. Where will this lead us? **Nikki van der Gaag** explores the paradox and suggests a way forward.

'WILL you still need me, will you still feed me/When I'm 64?' The Beatles' song may be old itself, but it lies at the heart of what most of us fear about ageing – not death, but neglect; not the added years but lack of love, lack of respect.

We wake up on the morning of our 60th or 65th birthdays, and suddenly we are 'old age pensioners' and 'senior citizens'. We don't feel any different from the day or the month or the year before, but we are now officially 'old'. Suddenly we are no longer part of the workforce, no longer 'productive'.

And many people, both young and old, feed this feeling of uselessness by saying, 'I've done my bit, I deserve a rest'. So they 'rest'. And the myth of old people as 'past it' is perpetuated from generation to generation.

It is a dangerous myth, not just for our own self-respect as we grow older, but also for a world with an ever-growing population and shrinking resources. If the 'old' do not participate in society, it is society's loss as well as their own.

'Ageing,' says Alex Kalache, Head of the Programme on Ageing at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, 'is the number one problem in the world. And if it is not addressed *now*, there will be serious consequences.'[1]

It is the 'number one problem' because the numbers of people over 60 – and particularly those over 80 – are growing fast. In 1959 there were 200 million people over 60 in the world, accounting for eight per cent of the total population. By 2025 there will be 1.2 billion – 14 per cent of the total. Contrary to popular myth, by early in the next century three-quarters of these will live in the Third World.[2]

And it is in developing countries that the growth is greatest and the problems are most acute. Their elderly populations are growing at many times the rate of those in the North. For example, over the next 50 years the numbers of those over 60 in Britain will increase by 23 per cent and by 100 per cent in the US – but by 201 per cent in Bangladesh and 300 per cent in Brazil.[3]

Where Britain and the US, Australia and Canada have had 100 years to deal with increased longevity, China or Brazil have only 20 or 30 years to deal with the same rate of growth – and fewer resources with which to do so. And even countries which have had an older population for longer are struggling for positive ways of responding.

They are not helped by the fact that 'age' is a relative concept. Each one of us will know people in their sixties who regard themselves as 'old' – and are therefore seen as 'old' by everyone else. We will also know and people in their seventies, eighties or even nineties who remain very much part of society and who are mentally if not physically agile.

In Vilcabamba, you may not be considered 'old' until you are 90. In Potosi, you might be 'old' at 30

'Old' also varies from country to country and place to place. The Vilcabamba Valley in Ecuador, for example, is known locally as the *Valle de la Ancianidad* (Valley of Old Age) or the *Isla de Imunidad* (Island of Immunity). It is one of three places in the world where many people live to be over 100 – the others are in the Georgian Republic and in Pakistan. No-one really knows why, but a number of factors have been suggested, including the altitude, a mainly vegetable diet with little fat, reasonable work conditions, comparatively little stress, the beneficial effects of the *huilco* tree which recycles air – and the relative isolation of the valley.

Further down in South America, in Potosi in Bolivia, life expectancy is at the other extreme – people don't expect to live beyond their 40th birthday. Mining is the main occupation. The miners and their families suffer from harsh conditions, poverty, overwork, accidents, silicosis and other forms of lung poisoning.[4]

In Vilcabamba, you may not be considered 'old' until you are 90. In Potosi, you might be 'old' at 30.

So if we can't even really generalize about the meaning of 'old', can we say that there is an 'ageing crisis'? Under current conditions and in the light of today's population predictions, I think the answer must be 'yes'. As more and more people live longer and their numbers increase both in actual numbers and relative to the general population, there will be fewer people to care for them if and when they need it. The dependency ratio, as it is called, is also affected by the increasing financial pressures put on families, particularly in the Third World. More and more women everywhere are working. Because women form

Granny care in Zimbabwe – like many grandparents, Mrs Ncube looks after her grandchildren. But their parents are not working – they have died of AIDS.

PHOTO PREVIOUS PAGE: EVE ARNOLD / MAGNUM; RIGHT: TIM NUNN / PANOS PICTURES

STUART FRANKLIN / MAGNUM

Harsh lives: poverty, overwork and ill-health mean that miners in the silver mines of Potosi, Bolivia, do not expect to live beyond 40.

the vast majority of carers, this also affects the numbers of people able to support elderly members of the family. As governments squeeze pensions and health systems in an attempt to keep taxes low or to conform to the 'structural adjustment' policies imposed by the International Monetary Fund, it is old people who are likely to suffer most.

But this need not be. As Simone de Beauvoir said: 'The meaning or lack of meaning that old age takes on in any given society puts that whole society to the test.'

If so, governments and international agencies have failed that test – neither seriously addressing the issue nor seeing the need to invest major resources in it. For example, one of the main reasons that people in Africa or Asia or South America cite for having large numbers of children is to 'provide security' in old age. If people knew that they could remain independent and yet be supported in their old age, then they would not feel the need to have so many children. Nor would they fear the isolation from society that arises from not having children. And yet, time after time, support for old people is ignored in discussions on population.

In almost every culture, financial independence gives older people respect from others and consequently more dignity

As it is 'old' people – both in the North and the South – have been increasingly isolated from the rest of society in retirement homes which were seen as the model of how to deal with old age. People's need for health care increases as they grow older, and the seriously-disabled minority need special care and attention. But many people who do not have serious physical or mental disabilities have nonetheless been shut away in unsuitable homes, cut off from the rest of the world.

Today a growing number of governments are promoting another model which ostensibly helps people to live more independently: 'care in the community', as it is often known. What it usually means is 'care in the family' and in most cases it does not spring from a philosophical belief that families care best for their own but rather from the need to find a cheap solution to the problem of caring for the old.

In Muslim countries, putting the aged into old people's homes has always been anathema. King Hassan II has said that: 'If an old-age home were built in Morocco, I believe it would mean the country no longer existed. Moreover, I would be the first to burn it, in an act of auto-da-fé.'[5]

This is all very well, but it puts the burden of caring very much back into the family – usually the women. While families can in some cases provide the support needed, the breakdown of the extended family and the squeezing of household resources have often led to neglect of, rather than succour for the elderly. When resources are stretched, the old are likely to be the ones who go without.

It is precisely for this reason that in most of the world, 'old' people continue to work until they die. They have no choice. They need to earn an income – of sorts – or they don't eat. In Malawi, for example, a recent survey showed that 85 per cent of men over 65 were still part of the 'labour force'. In Liberia it was 70 per cent and in Guatemala, 63 per cent.[6] Indeed, people may even have to work harder as they get older, taking on the manual labour that younger people do not want to do. Many have to uproot themselves – old women who outlive their husbands are forced to leave their villages to seek work in the cities. In most Third World countries, older people figure as part of the huge informal economy, selling vegetables on the streets or recycling garbage.

In almost every culture, financial independence gives older people more respect from others and consequently more dignity. Yet 'old' people are not considered to be officially productive because they are not usually earning an official wage.

All over the world older people, particularly women, are looking after grandchildren so that their daughters or sons can work. In parts of Africa particularly stricken by the AIDS epidemic, the young and sexually active have nearly all died, leaving the oldest generation to care for the youngest. And in Asia migration to the cities produces the same result.

Unpaid childcare, housework and people-maintenance is the work that makes the world go round. But in a world increasingly based on a cash economy this kind of work is not regarded as 'real work' and the size of their pay packet has become the only measure of a person's worth.

This is illustrated in a classic manner by the World Bank's recent report entitled:

A different tune – in Cuba, old people run their own retirement homes and take their skills into the community.

PAUL SCHATZBERGER / PANOS PICTURES

PENSIONERS for PEACE

RAISSA PAGE / FORMAT

Pensioners protest: like these women campaigning for peace, older people everywhere are pushing for change.

Averting the Old Age crisis: policies to protect the old and promote growth. This report pretty much ignored the informal economy and advocated a 'three-pillar approach' to financing the old which is based entirely on pensions. But even according to the World Bank, an estimated 60 per cent of the world's labour force and 70 per cent of old people, are part of the informal economy – they have no pension plan and are unlikely to be able to save.

Kasturi Sen, a specialist on ageing and policy issues, has quite a different strategy. She calls it the 'life-cycle approach'. The circumstances that people find themselves in when they are older, she says, is simply a continuation of the situation that they have been in throughout their lives. If you are poor, overworked and in ill-health when you are young, these conditions are likely to be the same or worse when you are old.

She argues that in order to improve the quality of peoples' lives – and especially the lives of women, who in most societies live longer – policies should aim at improving education in earlier life, helping people to move in and out of the labour market, and enabling women to take out financial credit and buy land. Better nutrition and access to contraception would improve health. These things, she says, would do more than anything else to 'reduce the possibilities of acute vulnerability in later stages of life'.[7]

In other words, the 'problem' of the elderly is something which concerns us not only in old age but in youth and middle age as well.

This is also one of the key messages of activist groups on ageing issues like the Gray Panthers. Started in the US in 1970 to oppose the war in Vietnam, they have become a worldwide network active on health care, housing, discrimination and work. Maggie Kuhn, one of the founders, is now in her eighties, but as feisty as ever. She spoke to Betty Friedan about the importance of old and young working together: 'Our philosophy was using gray power with the young for issues on the cutting edge of social change. I think we've established the fact that old age is a triumph. What we've done is establish the intergenerational bond necessary for real social change, the continuity of life. The old and the young need each other. We're opposed to the segregation of old people... Older people have so much to give to society...'[8]

'The meaning or lack of meaning that old age takes on in any given society puts that whole society to the test'

The recognition that older people have valuable contributions to make is slowly permeating the thinking of development activists. Mark Gorman of HelpAge International recognizes that in recent years there has been 'a growing focus on the involvement of older people as active participants in development'.[9]

In Colombia, older people who are part of *Pro Vida* (For Life) have set up the city's first recycling scheme. In Kenya, a group of middle-aged women got together to tackle the problem of earning income in their later years. They set up schemes for clean water and a successful poultry-keeping project. They called themselves *Itambya Yaa Aka Kichakasimba* (women of Kichakasimba take a step ahead).[10]

In Argentina old people have been leading a militant grassroots campaign since the pension cuts of 1992. They held a 24-hour-a-day vigil in the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, enduring great cold and hardship until they were finally expelled by the police two months later. After that they began a vigil and protest every Thursday outside Parliament. Occasionally they stopped traffic, occupied government buildings and even scuffled with police and government officials in the streets of the capital.

On many occasions protesters were arrested but sometimes armed riot police withdrew before them, unable to frighten and unwilling to club down these dignified grandmothers. On 2 March 1994 thousands of elderly people converged on the centre of the capital to mark 100 weeks of these dramatic protests.[6]

Finally the Argentinian Government realized that they could not discredit the protesters. They raised pensions for the oldest, agreed to pay some of the money owed to the poorest and promised a reform of the pension system. But they failed to restore the cuts. So the old people took to the law. As of today, 350,000 court cases have been lodged with the High Court. Around 100,000 have already been won and the 'old people's' protest threatens to throw the whole economic policy of the Argentinian Government off course.

We too can push for change in policy and in attitudes – including our own. We can plan for our old age like the women of Kichakasimba. And we can work together, young, middle-aged and old, to ensure that everyone has enough to provide them with a satisfying and dignified life.

1999 will be the International Year of Ageing. Let us use the four years between now and then to take up the challenge of David Pitt, a non-retired 'retired person' who volunteers here at the *New Internationalist:*

'Let us direct our energies against those responsible for the poverty... and for declining health services. Let us also do what we can to support those living in other countries where care for the aged is a matter of gross neglect. Let us band together and be wilful and cantankerous and obstreperous. Above all, let us never apologize for growing old.' ■

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1 Quotes from Alex Kalache taken from an interview by Nikki van der Gaag. **2** MSJ Pathy (Ed.) 'Ageing in Developing Countries' by Alex Kalache in *Principles and Practices of Geriatric Medicine*, John Wiley 1991. **3** Kasturi Sen *Ageing – Debates on demographic transition and social policy*, Zed Press 1994. **4** Ken Tout *Ageing in Developing Countries*, Oxford University Press 1989. **5** Jeannine Jacquemin *Elderly Women and the Family* Soroptomist International. **6** Suzanne S Paul and James A Paul *Humanity Comes of Age*, WCC Publications 1994. **7** Kasturi Sen *Women in later life: health, security and poverty*, International Health Exchange, April 1994. **8** Betty Friedan *The Fountain of Age*, Vintage 1993. **9** Mark Gorman from a discussion with Nikki van der Gaag **10** United Nations *The World Aging Situation* 1991.

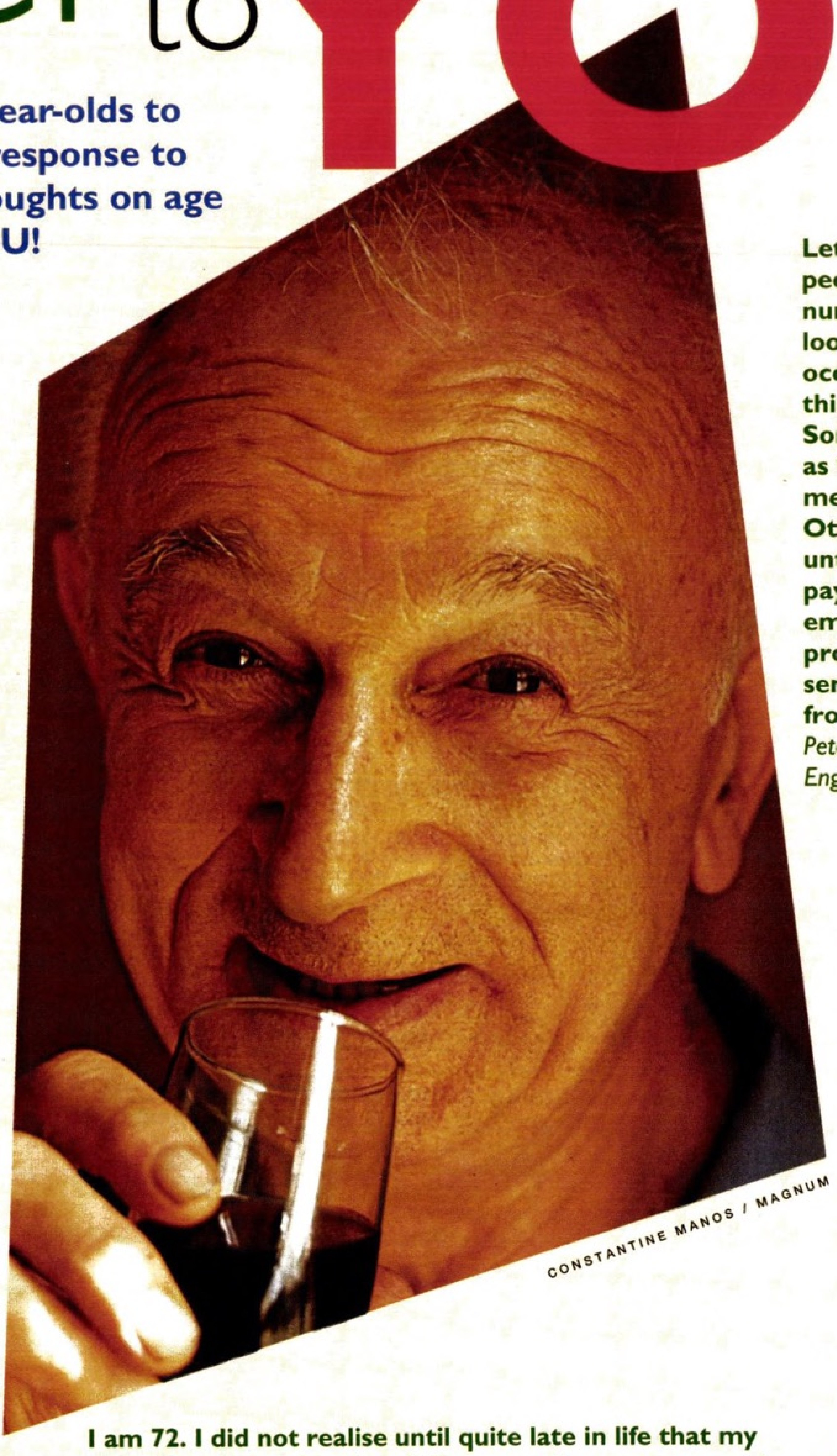
Over to YOU

Many of you – from 19-year-olds to 90-year-olds – wrote in response to our request for your thoughts on age and ageing. THANK YOU!

I hope your issue on ageing will deal with the problem of ageism. This is not against the law in the UK at present, as sexism and racism are, but it makes for a real problem in employment. My husband, a chartered accountant in his fifties, is unemployed. We suspect that ageism accounts for his inability even to get interviews. Lies and hair-dye are being considered, simply so that he can end his frustration at not being able to use his talents, ability and experience!
Isobel Shepherd (54), London, England

I am fortunate in enjoying the blessings of a loving family, a wide circle of good friends and, as part of the Prisoner's Rights Group, a wider circle of prisoner-friends who make this remaining period the most worthwhile and useful of a long life of struggles against injustice in all its malevolent forms.

But what about those who are left to a lonely existence with none of these advantages? My suggestion is to find people in one's own community who survive mainly through the personal interest and involvement of those like themselves – we are all seeking a way to be needed.
Claire Culhane, Vancouver, Canada



CONSTANTINE MANOS / MAGNUM

I am 72. I did not realise until quite late in life that my mental picture of ageing did not match my own experience. I suspect that the wrong perceptions can lead to matching one's life to one's perceptions instead of the other way round. You can come to look and feel quite old unnecessarily. As medical knowledge increases we have an increasing chance of living active and healthy lives, perhaps up to the age of 100. Why not?
Denys Whitehead, (72), Livingstone, Zimbabwe

Let us reject this idea of old people being a 'burden'. Any number of people on retiring look forward to a change of occupation, to tackling something completely different. Some of these jobs will count as 'gainful' employment, meaning jobs that are paid. Other people will take on voluntary work, not receiving pay and so not 'gainfully' employed, but all the same productively employed in the sense that society benefits from what they do.
Peter Little, Henley-on-Thames, England

I am happy and contented to be old; but I want to be spared decrepitude. Don't get me wrong. I don't want to be denied old age by being kept unnaturally young.

Some research seems to be aiming to have us all climbing mountains, swimming the Channel, holding down a job and having vigorous sex at 90. No thanks. I did as much of all those things as I want in my lifetime before I passed 60.

Now I want to experience being old. Why is age thought about as so disreputable, as a kind of disease? What is wrong with white hair and wrinkles and a life lived adagio without stress and hustle? Why do people want to be mistaken for their daughters' friends and fiancés?
Alison (75), Oxford, England

The most destructive form of ageing is social ageing. This can overtake individuals at ludicrously early ages, inhibiting them from following impulses and tastes which are seen as youthful prerogatives.

For instance, the 20-year-old who loves dancing but feels out of place in a disco, or the 40-year-old couple who abandon their favourite pub because it is taken over by under-age drinkers and the loud music prevents con versation. To remain an individual, not to conform to an age stereotype, requires independence of mind.
Jean Booth, Wantage, England

So how do we define age? Is it synonymous with the length of time our body has existed on this planet, or with the ability of the mind, or with the infinity of the soul? My body in its present form is 19 years old. My mind? Well, that is relative to who chooses to measure it. We seem determined to classify 'childhood', 'adolescence', 'adulthood' and 'old age' separately. Physical age is, however, often an unhelpful notion upon which we falsely base our judgements. As adults we must look inside and understand that all ages reside within the psyche of us all, and deserve equal respect, no matter what the 'outer age' may be.
Amy Kellam (19), Cornwall, England

Vanishing cream for the mind

The veneration of youth culture is more insidious than many of us realize. **Jeremiah Creedon** reports from the edge of the abyss.

I HAD a long talk the other night with a friend about a thing that seems to be on everyone's mind these days, or in it – Prozac, the antidepressant. A bottle of the pills stood between us on her kitchen table. We were debating whether she really needed them. Her doctor thought she did. A 40-year-old graphic artist who designs fashion catalogues, she had been feeling down recently. She wasn't alone. The more we discussed it, the more we felt that most of her colleagues had the same malaise.

These people were magazine editors, journalists, TV producers, photographers, a talent scout for a recording company – creative types, single for the most part, on the threshold of their fifth decades. They'd spent their careers packaging the ideas and sounds and images that form the artefacts of American popular culture. And now they were depressed. Some were already taking Prozac or Zoloft or some other version of Vitamin J, the new one-a-day joy supplements that American doctors are giving out so cavalierly. Depression can have many causes, some organic, some rising from the external circumstances. Could it also be an occupational disease? Other workers fall ill from handling toxic chemicals or breathing hazardous dust.

> **Today's paradigm is akin to a bedroom farce where the sexy mom seduces her daughter's boyfriend – while the daughter videotapes it all from the closet**

Maybe these artisans of the modern media have developed a melancholy born of chronic, repeated exposure to images of the gorgeous young. Mad as a hatter? No, these people are sad. Sad as the designer who realizes an idea of beauty she's given her life to shaping, to worshipping, now excludes her. And the reason why is simple. By her own standards, she's too old.

The same forces are at work on a wider scale, if in smaller doses. The Western mind is in love with youth. It is ultimately a hopeless love, a destructive love, a love that is easily exploited. But being love, we are convinced of its nobility, and all warnings against it go unheeded. Nothing can distract our gaze from the freshly-minted face on the magazine cover, the haughty poise of the soccer star, the bared body of the film actress. And this fascination isn't limited to the youthful icons of popular culture; it colors every aspect of Western life, from the family to the workplace.

Eternal youth

The media play a crucial role in the modern youth obsession, but simply to blame the media is like blaming violent films for the urban murder rate. The truth is more complex. The media articulate certain desires that, though long repressed, are integral to the Western character. Thanks to the media, the youth ethos may be more pervasive than ever before, more brilliantly portrayed, more often amplified to grotesque levels. But it certainly isn't new. A journey to its source is a good first step toward understanding the peculiar soul sickness it often induces.

> The kids aren't at fault. If anyone is, we are... we're the ones behind the cameras now. And the sad fact is, we'd rather look at young faces too

Today, the engine of the youth obsession is indisputably the United States. One of the country's largest exports is its youth-oriented popular culture, which is transmitted to other lands, if not the cosmos, via magazines, music, radio, television and film. In 1977, the US space probe Voyager 2 carried aloft a recorded sample of earthly sounds, including the word 'hello' in 69 languages, a baby's cry, a hyena's laugh and a wet kiss. The hope was this copper disc would help some other race solve the riddle of who we are. But compare it to the vast raw feed of television signals emanating from the planet during the last half-century. Voyager 2 is just now leaving the solar system. Meanwhile, last night's episode of the soap-opera *Baywatch*, pulsing outward at the speed of light, has already outraced it, bearing young women in thong bikinis to distant worlds.

Surely *Baywatch* provides the better clue to who we are. Movies and TV shows are this culture's myths, and Hollywood is its post-modern Olympus, its pantheon of stars, major and minor, playing roles analogous to the myriad gods and heroes that peopled the myths of ancient Greece. For the Greeks themselves, their gods were no doubt vividly real; only now, from a distance, do we see them as personified facets of the Greek mind. So it is with our myths, which spring from the American imagination like so many undeciphered dreams, their deep meaning opaque to us but perhaps vivid to those watching from afar.

What might they see that the dreamers don't? Well, perhaps what we see in the Greeks. They too were a culture obsessed with youth. The beauty of youth epitomized the Olympian era's idea of perfection, which according to the Italian scholar Roberto Calasso was 'the Greek gift par excellence – the goal this people always sought'. Beneath their pursuit and worship of the body beautiful lay a terribly stark vision of existence. 'Perfection of the outward appearance was indissolubly linked to the acceptance of a life without redemption, without salvation, without hope of repetition,' writes Calasso. 'It is only because life is irretrievable and unrepeatable that the glory of appearance can reach such intensity.'

A similar awareness – of the abyss – lies just beneath the modern youth obsession. Indeed, it may be generating the deep melancholy that seems to afflict those now leaving youth behind. Like the ancient Greeks, modern Americans work more and more without a net, and the collective anxiety is palpable.

We've given the preoccupation with youth a modern spin, of course. In a study of ageing among men conducted during the 1960s, the psychologist Daniel J Levinson found that mourning the loss of youth was common: 'The sense of ageing and mortality is accentuated by the change in generational status around 40,' when 'A man (sic) knows more deeply than ever before that he is going to die.' But this traditional crisis may be getting more intense, or so it seems. The ties to family and religion that once offered some protection against old age and death are even more frayed today. And the insights of modern science are making things worse.

Sex appeal

Consider genetics. The geneticist sees life not as a gradual rise and fall peaking at maturity, but as a grim record of constant, insidious decline. According to the British geneticist Steve Jones, 'Our genes change and decay through our lives', with each day's copy a blurrier version of the one the day before. There's only one way to stop this process. Sex. 'In some ways, sex is the key to immortality', writes Jones. 'It is the fountain of eternal youth – not for the individuals who indulge in it, but for their genes.'

This distinction is lost on those frantic to stay in the sexual swing of things – as

Top models of their time: Naomi Campell and a Greek youth.

BEN COSTER / CAMERA PRESS

the advertisers know. They're masters at shunting an insecurity about one's sex appeal into an impulse to buy things. It may be that single people approaching middle age may be more vulnerable to this panic and thus to those who exploit it. Marriage and family probably do afford some buffer against the pain of witnessing one's own decay. But a peculiar thing about life in a youth-obsessed culture is that everyone is single forever, if only in theory. Marriages, like jobs, are less likely to endure these days, and no-one can dismiss the possibility that they'll soon be hunting for another mate. We're all single in our fantasies as well, as the media constantly remind us. In a land where no-one wants to admit they're old, no-one can admit they're sexually unavailable either.

Competition

Gone is the genteel world of Shakespeare, where parents looked on wistfully as their children tasted the innocent joys of first love. Today's paradigm is more akin to a bedroom farce where the sexy mom seduces her daughter's boyfriend – while the daughter videotapes it all from the closet. American culture has a peculiar levelling effect on the generations, a fact portrayed on countless TV shows. Take *Baywatch*, whose central characters are a strapping California lifeguard and his young son, both of whom spend most of their time chasing 'girls' on the beach. *Baywatch* may actually be more popular in Europe than in the States, which makes sense. Its appeal isn't just the sexy jiggle – the French can produce that on their own. It's a fascination with the American family, expressed 150 years ago by the first great student of this culture, Alexis de Tocqueville. 'In America the family, in the Roman and aristocratic signification of the word, does not exist,' he noted. In the new democratic family, parental authority diminishes and 'equality prevails around the domestic hearth'.

Equality is not harmony, however. The young and old now tend to see each other as sexual and economic competitors.

'Getting old really stinks,' declared the tennis star Martina Navratilova, 38, after beating Marketa Kochta, a 14-year-old opponent. 'I wish I had her legs,' she told a reporter from the *New York Times*, 'but I don't envy her all the attention she's gotten: she's been turned into a star before she's even played a match.'

Sport has always been the arena where the consolations of age – wisdom, authority, influence, respect – count for nothing. The generations duke it out in the flesh, stripped of all social armour and the young inevitably carry the day. The fact that we know the outcome beforehand reveals the element of ritual in sport. But this stylized conflict between old and young is no longer limited to the ring; it has spilled over into the stands. Everyone must eventually confront a vast onslaught of teenagers eager to do them in.

There's a fear among American 'Baby Boomers' – the generation born after the Second World War – that the country's social security system will go broke before they collect their pensions. A similar thing has already happened with another so-called entitlement: their right to the mantle of leadership in various cultural fields, including literature and the arts. At last mature enough to have real insights, they discover no one cares. The cameras have swung toward the Marketa Kochtas of the world. Prematurely, it seems, they feel themselves becoming part of what Betty Friedan has dubbed 'the problem of age – all these people refusing to die'.

RICHARD OPEN / CAMERA PRESS

Advantage youth: at 38 Martina Navratilova is too 'old'.

Returning from exile

The kids aren't at fault. If anyone is, we are. Like my friend the graphic artist, a loyal keeper of fashion's flame, we're all being hoisted on our own petards. Vast market forces are at work, of course, and they no doubt have a great effect on our desires. But we're the ones behind the cameras now. And the sad fact is, we'd rather look at young faces too.

My friend and I stand on the verge of an exile, gazing with sadness down at the valley of youth, longing to return. Someone older, like Friedan, would tell us to get over it, that a good life waits beyond. Friedan has been on the lecture circuit lately, packing halls, peddling a book on the youth obsession.

Not all she has to say is heartening, at least for men. Could it really be that women live longer because they're the spry sex, resilient as willows, while male vanity makes men more rigid? Perhaps not. But good for her and for everyone else in the public eye who does not intend to leave it just because they're old.

Rock stars, professional golfers and other ageing celebrities are joining this effort to redefine what the second half of life should be. Their success reflects a demographic fact; American society is getting older and the elderly command a growing share of the country's economic and political clout.

The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), a non-partisan lobby representing those over 50 already has a profound effect on public policy, an impact that seems bound to increase as the AARP roster swells. For most Americans, this new focus on the old will help them leave behind the wider cultural fixation with youth. But the artisans of the modern media will no doubt have a harder time making the break. Their deeper ties to the youth culture have led them to the brink of a true philosophical crisis, which I believe to be the cause of much of their despair.

There's nothing scientific about this diagnosis, but it's clear the doctors now treating their melancholy aren't that informed by science either. We should all ask ourselves if the modern cures for such anguish are really needed or merely cosmetic, a kind of vanishing cream for the mind. If the wrinkles on a face are with us forever, then so are those of thought, and only by seeing them clearly for what they are can we go on with life in something like peace. ■

Jeremiah Creedon is a writer living in Minneapolis, US.

I would pick more daisies

If I had to live my life over again...
I'd dare to make more mistakes next time:
I'd relax:
I would limber up:
I'd be sillier than I've been this trip.
I would take fewer things seriously.
I would take more trips,
I would climb more mountains, swim more rivers;
I would eat more ice-cream and less beans.
I would perhaps have more actual troubles
but I would have fewer imaginary ones.
You see, I'm one of those people who live seriously and sanely
hour after hour, day after day.
I've had my moments and if I had to do it over again,
I'd have more of them.
In fact I'd try to have nothing else - just moments, one after another -
instead of living so many years ahead of each day.
I've been one of those persons who never goes
anywhere without a thermometer,
a hot-water bottle, a raincoat and a parachute.
If I had to do it again I would travel lighter than I have.
If I had to live my life over I would start
barefoot earlier in the Spring and stay that way later in the Fall.
I would go to more dances, I would ride more merry-go-rounds, and...
I would pick more daisies.

Nadine Stair, aged 85.

ILLUSTRATION: ANN CHRISTIE

Bosom of the family

Old people should be cared for by their families. That's the tradition in Nigeria and that's the way it should stay, says the Government. But times have changed and so has Nigerian society.

Elizabeth Obadina reports.

Old people with no family may find a place in the Holy Family Home (below) – others must carry on working to survive (right).

MOROUNKE WILLIAMS

ELIZABETH OBADINA

'GETTING old in Nigeria may become a source of great fear for the youth of today,' says Mr Ose Ogunkorode, secretary of the newly-formed Retired and Old People's Foundation. In September 1994 the Foundation petitioned Nigeria's military rulers for funding to meet the 'tremendous deprivation and unfortunate neglect' that it sees among the Nigerian elderly.

Elderly pressure groups are not new to Nigerian society. Dr Yomi Peters, a general practitioner, says that they have always had an influence: 'We like to think of our people caring for everyone within the family. Although that may have been universally true – and still holds true in most instances

– that caring wasn't always spontaneous. It was a person's duty.'

She goes on to explain that sons and daughters were often 'bullied into caring for elderly parents, aunts, uncles or even cousins by well-organized associations of elderly people in the village. Nowadays a sense of duty is not one of the social values encouraged by Nigerian society, the youth aren't to hand in the villages and our elders are losing out.'

Mama Ade, aged 62, has four sons and one daughter scattered to the four corners of the earth in search of employment and security. She knows that they will not be able to support her in old age. 'Luckily for me I bought land when I had savings and built on it. Now I am old the rents can keep me. And if I get old and sick I will get rid of one of my housegirls and get a nurse instead.'

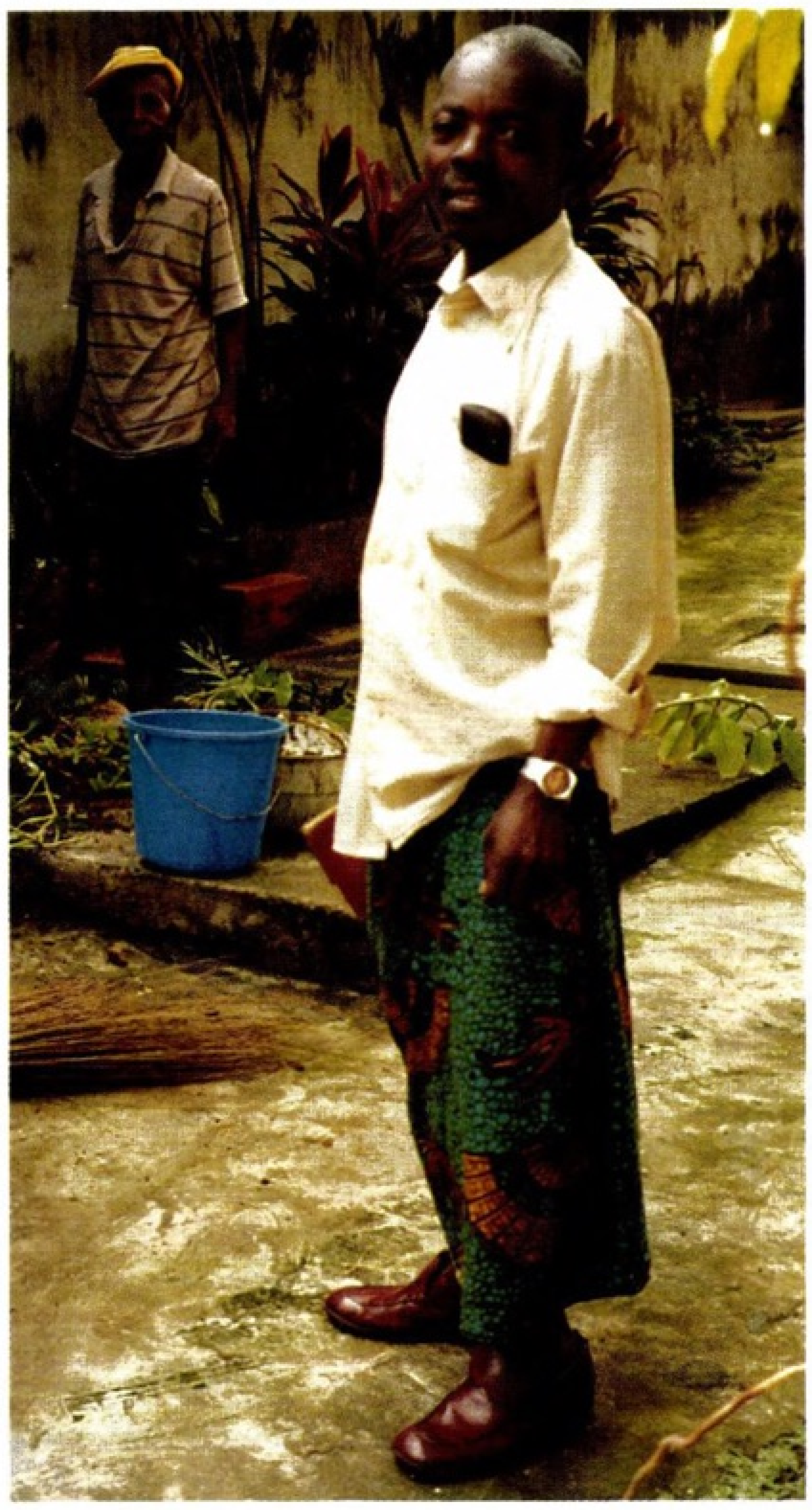
But this is not at all how she used to envision the last years of her life. At her age, having brought up five children, worked as a trader all her life to put her sons through university and supported her husband until his death, she feels she should now be cosseted, looked after by her children and surrounded by grandchildren. 'I should be relying on them, but they still rely on me even though they are grown-up,' she laments.

But Mama Ade is comparatively lucky. Most Nigerians must continue working, mainly as traders or small-scale farmers, until their health fails. Elderly people without a family or savings or too frail to work often face a life on the streets. In Lagos, a city of six million people, there are two old people's homes. They provide just 37 places to strictly-destitute elderly. Nationally there are 13 homes serving Nigeria's population of 95 million.

'Our home is not meant for people with children,' says Sister Bibiana Ovigho who runs the Holy Family Home for the Elderly in the Muslim slums of Lagos. 'We hold firm to tradition and believe that an old person's life is complete within their family.'

The Sisters strenuously attempt to relocate the destitute elderly brought to their doors back with their families. But it is not always possible. 'The extended-family system can't work when everyone is struggling to feed themselves,' says Sister Bibiana. 'Fewer people have time or money for elderly aunts and uncles who do not have children of their own.'

But even in the most loving and caring of households, elderly people are facing a new problem: loneliness. 'Nowadays everyone has to go to work to survive,' says Sister Bibiana. 'Mothers go to work, children go to school and the elderly one is left at home. Lonely. Even for wealthy families who put a housegirl there to care for their aged the problem is not solved, for what the elderly need is love and to feel that they are still very important people. We have to make time to listen to them. And no-one seems to have time any more.'



Gardens of hope – 66-year-old Sunday Barrah (top) and Ezekial Eyoh can only dream of retiring to the village.

ELIZABETH OBADINA

Ideally most of Nigeria's elderly would prefer to stay in or return to the quieter life of their ancestral towns and villages. Most rent-payers in Nigeria's cities are building themselves a house in the village, block by block. In the popular imagination the village is a place where there is no loneliness, where the cost of living is cheaper, where there are friends on tap for support and comfort 24 hours a day and where grandchildren are a constant source of pleasure. Many elderly Nigerians keep hold of the dream – but the reality is very different.

'What would we live on if I go home?' asks Sunday Barrah. The 66-year-old grandfather treks in from the outlying suburbs of Lagos to tidy gardens. Most of his wages are spent on transportation. Some goes towards food and the rent of one room for himself and his two unemployed sons. The balance he sends home to his wife in a village in eastern Nigeria. She is keeping the spacious family bungalow ready for his return. She eats what she farms and relies on the money sent from Lagos for other manufactured essentials. Her family sent her one of her granddaughters to help with the heavy work and to keep an eye on her failing health. It is not the retirement idyll she and her husband dreamt of during their middle age in Lagos.

Pensionless, confronted with increasingly expensive health care and with family resources already stretched to the limit, all Nigerians face a grim old age unless the Government steps in with material help. There are proposals before the Constituent Assembly – convened by Nigeria's current military rulers – to provide free health care for all aged 65 and over. But at the moment all health care must be paid for.

The Federal Ministry of Health and Human Services is watching with interest the progress of the scheme in Minna, a northern state capital, whereby households are paid a subsidy of 150 *naira* (about $7.50) monthly to keep their elderly destitutes from begging in the streets.

'We feel care for the elderly should take place within the family. Government policy has always been to emphasize the traditional system of caring and nowadays it needs to adjust and identify the additional support which that traditional system needs,' says David Waminaje, Director of Social Welfare of the Federal Ministry of Health and Human Services.

The general reluctance to make financial provision for old age is a major problem. 'Junior staff don't like subscribing to pension schemes,' says a manager for one of the foreign multinational companies operating in Nigeria. 'Young staff are eternally optimistic. No-one believes that their lowly job is anything less than a stepping-stone to a big contract and becoming a millionaire. But more seriously, inflation makes a joke of receiving a *naira* pension in 30 years' time. The *naira* is virtually worthless.'

Meanwhile, old people are not a priority for the Government. Out of Nigeria's 95 million people only 0.02 per cent survive to become officially elderly: that is, over 65. In fact, life expectancy for Nigerians in 1989 was 54. By 1993, according to the Central Bank's economic report, it had fallen to 52. As far as the Government is concerned, resuscitating infant immunization programmes which prolonged life expectancies during the 1980s is a more pressing social need.

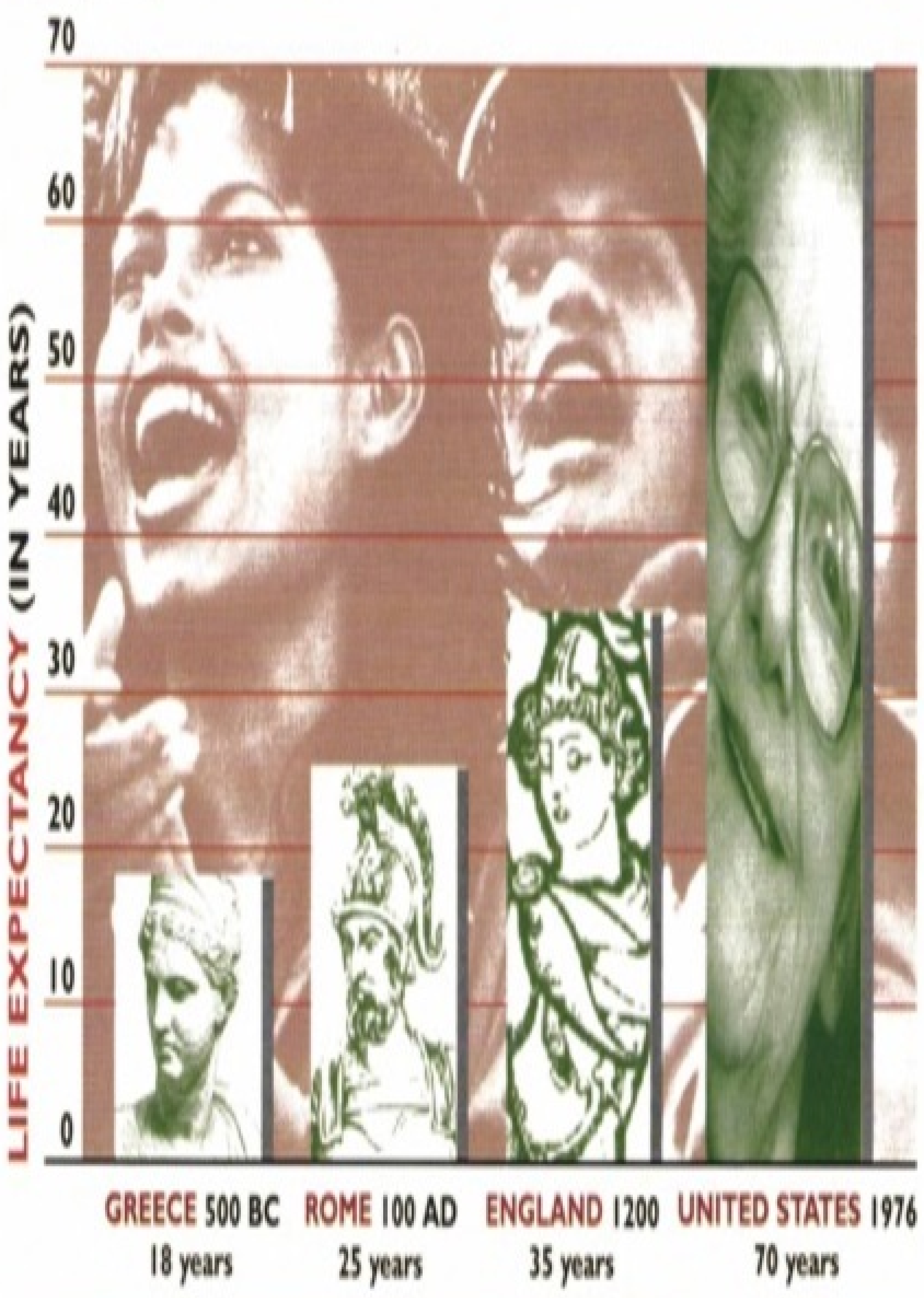
So care for the elderly stays where it has always been – in the bosom of the family. To Nigeria's cash-strapped Government this makes both financial and ideological sense. The problem is that the elderly are increasingly getting a raw deal from the very bosom that is meant to sustain them. ■

Elizabeth Obadina is a freelance writer and journalist living in Lagos.

A RIPE OLD AGE
THE FACTS

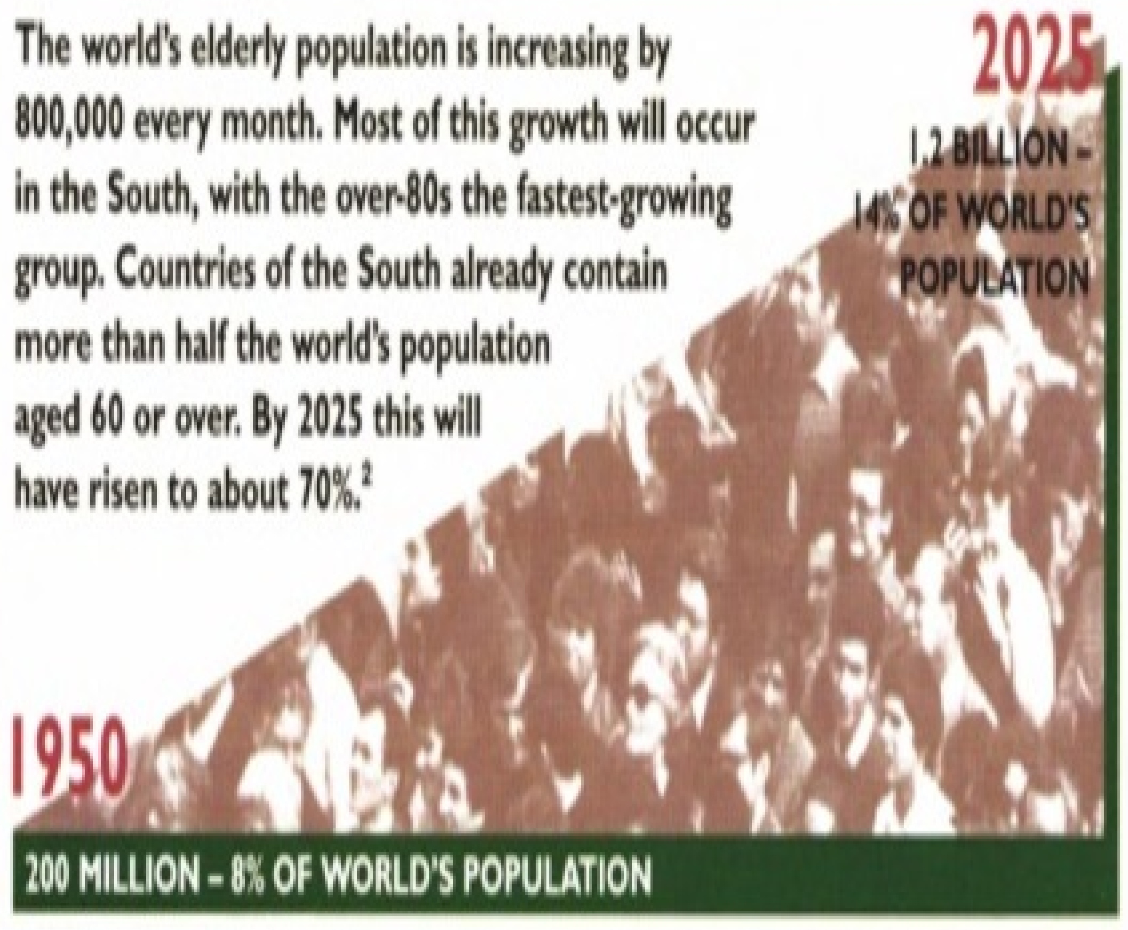
LIFE EXPECTANCY THROUGH THE AGES

People are living longer. 500 years ago people didn't expect to live much beyond their twenties. Today they live into their sixties, seventies and beyond.[1]



WOMAN IN SPECTACLES: ULRIKE PREUSS / FORMAT. CLAUDE SAUVAGEOT

FOR RICHER FOR POORER

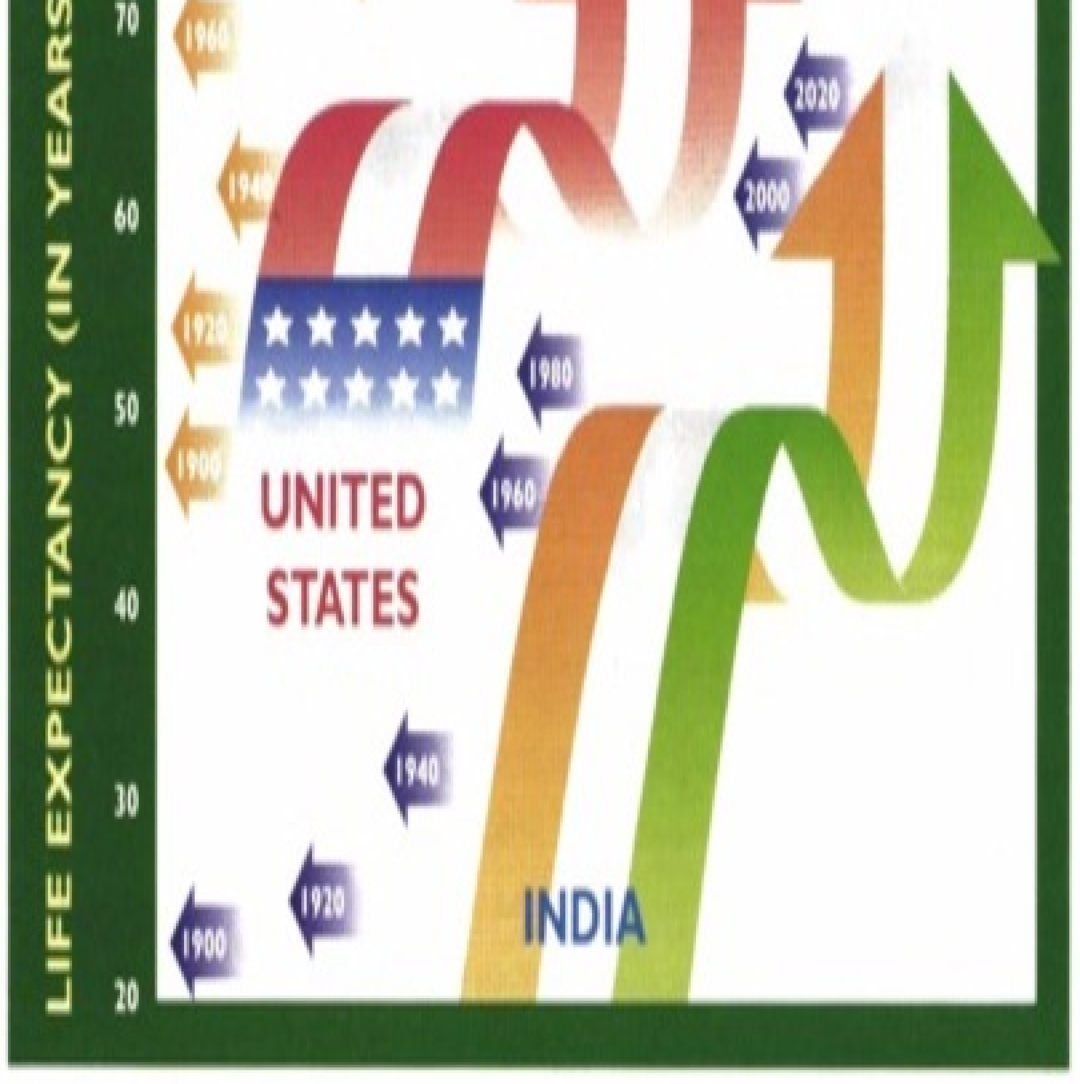


The world's elderly population is increasing by 800,000 every month. Most of this growth will occur in the South, with the over-80s the fastest-growing group. Countries of the South already contain more than half the world's population aged 60 or over. By 2025 this will have risen to about 70%.[2]

ELLIOT ERWITT / MAGNUM

THE CENTURY GAP

People in the North still live longer than those in the South. But the gap is narrowing as the century draws to an end, and will continue to narrow into and beyond the year 2000.[3]

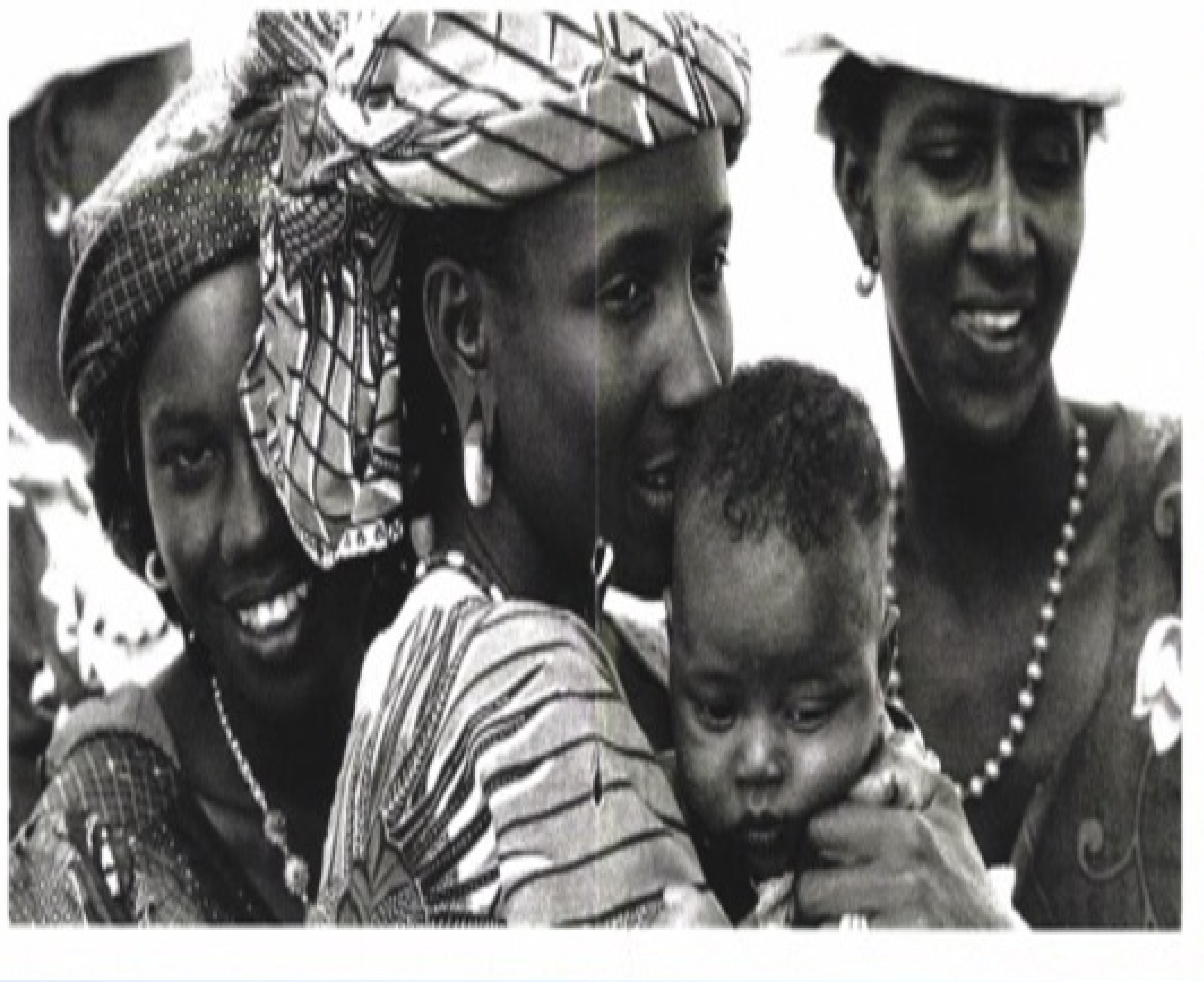


MOTHER AND CHILD PHOTO: JEREMY HARTLEY / PANOS PICTURES

WOMEN AND MEN

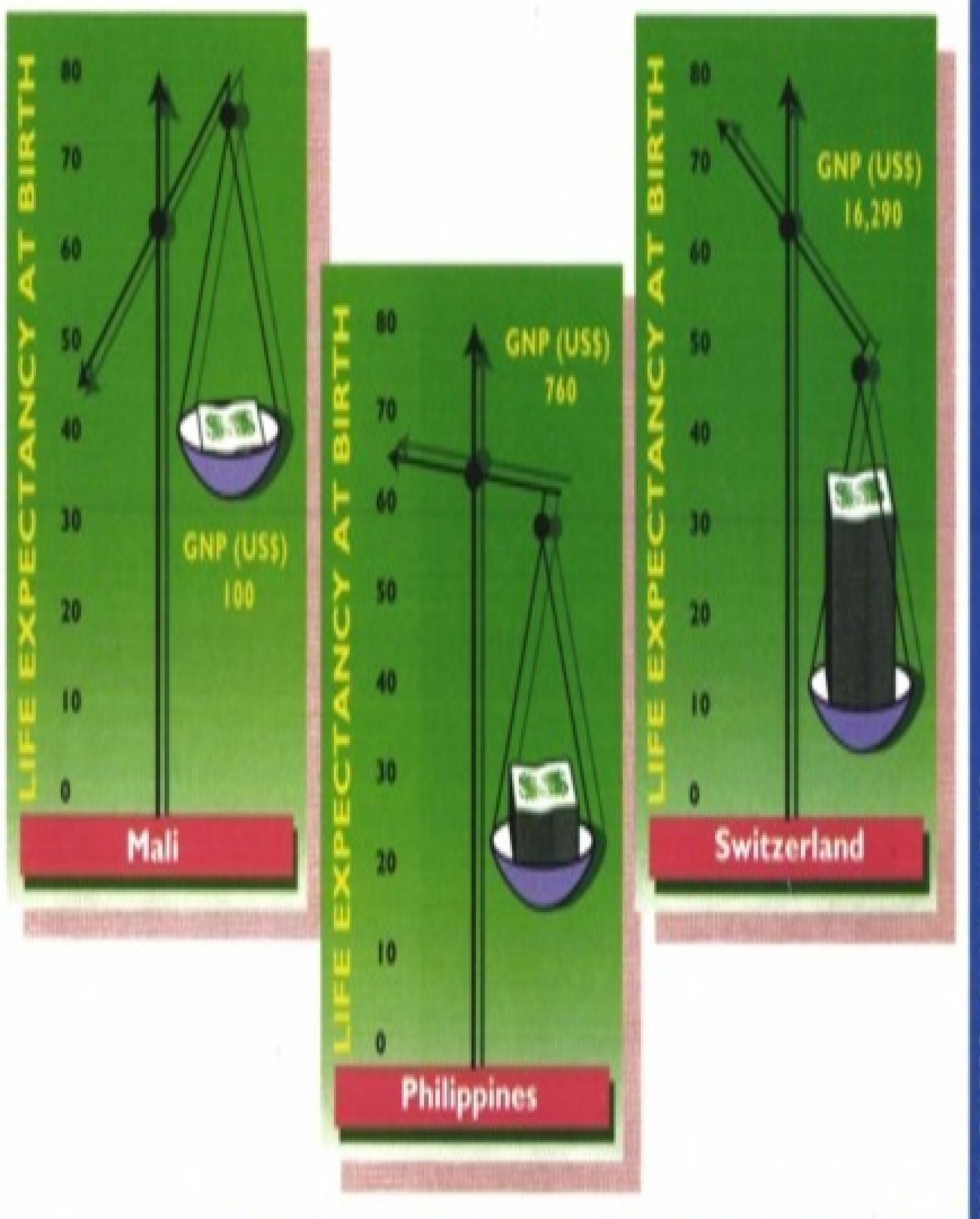
Women live longer than men. Almost one old person in four is over 75, and of these almost two-thirds are women. But longevity does not necessarily bring happiness; most of these elderly women are likely to be living in poverty.

- Life expectancy at age 15 is eight years longer for women than for men in the US, seven years in Canada, five years in Mauritius and four years in Venezuela.
- Because most women marry men older than themselves and are less likely to remarry, a much higher proportion of women end up living alone. In Asia and Africa, more than half the women over 65 are widows. Under 20 per cent of men are widowers.
- Women, and especially poor women, are more likely than men to be poor in their old age. In Chile, 65 per cent of old people receiving social assistance are women. In China 41 per cent of old women have incomes which leave them in extreme poverty.



THE GREYING OF NATIONS

The richer the country you live in – the higher the GNP – the more chance you have of living a long time. Figures below are for 1985.[4]

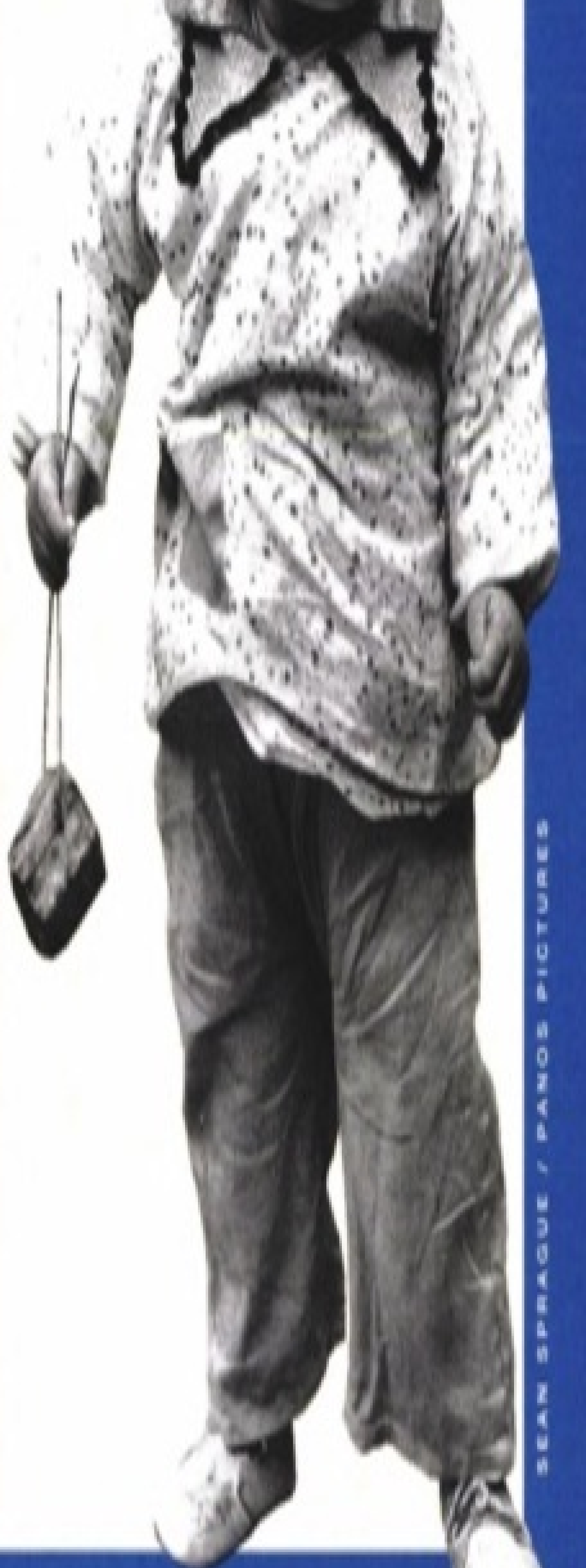


MAIN PHOTO: ALAN HUGHES

ARE CHILDREN BAD FOR YOU?

	1981 Number of babies born to each woman	1981 Life Expectancy at Birth (in years)	1992 Number of babies born to each woman	1992 Life Expectancy at Birth (in years)
Bangladesh	6.4	48	4.8	53
Morocco	6.9	57	4.4	63
El Salvador	5.6	63	3.2	66
Vietnam	5.1	63	3.9	64
Egypt	4.8	57	4.2	61
India	4.8	52	3.9	60
Brazil	4.0	64	2.8	66
Colombia	3.7	63	2.7	69

The theory goes that children keep you on your toes, in touch with the younger generation as you grow older. But it is also the case that too many children drain your health as well as your pocket. The fewer children you have, the longer you are likely to live. Declining fertility rates in many countries in Asia and Latin America are reflected here in increased life expectancy.[5]



SEAN SPRAGUE / PANOS PICTURES

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1. Adapted from **The Sociology of Aging** by Diana K Harris and William E Cole *(Houghton Mifflin 1980)* **2. Ageing, health, social change and policy in developing countries,** by Kasturi Sen with Alex Kalache and Yolanda Coombes *(Dept. of Public Health and Policy, LSHTM, 1993)* **3 & 4. Ageing in Developing Countries** by Ken Tout *(OUP/Help Age International, 1989)* **5.World Bank Development Report 1983** and **Human Development Report 1994 6.** Other information from **The World Aging Situation: Strategies and Policiies** *(United Nations, 1991)*

A crone's progress

When **Allegra Taylor** became a grandmother she packed her bags and set off on a journey round the world in search of wisdom.

HIDDEN from view in an overgrown field on the edge of the magically-named little town of Stepaside in Wales was the Mother Nature camp – a collection of tepees and straw-roofed huts dotted about in the long grass – where I had come to learn about 'magic in the European tradition' from Anna, a gentle English witch. I knew practically nothing about magic and had no idea what to expect. But if there were a continuing tradition of European magic, a search for wisdom should surely include an acquaintance with it.

By one of those remarkable synchronisms that seem no accident I first became a grandmother on 31 October, All Hallow's Eve, the holy day of Hecate, the Goddess of the Underworld, the Mother of Witches, the Crone. Hecate is the archetype of the wise old woman, the Hag who knows how to work magic and commune with spirits. She symbolizes the courageous one who journeys in the darker realms of the psyche. She is the traveller seeking transformation. She stands at a crossroads symbolizing a time of decision and renewal.

I too was on a quest. I had decided to go on a journey to search for the wise, courageous old woman I want to become. It would be a quest in many parts of the world for the crone in her many guises. I wanted to discover her, reclaim her, invent her, celebrate her.

Both my grandmothers died before I was born. Now I was a grandmother myself.

Who would be my role models in our youth-worshipping culture? Joan Collins? Barbara Cartland? I was on a quest for an alternative.

So here I was with three other apprentice witches sitting round the fire eating a vegetarian stew. We droned some tuneless chants and banged on some drums. It was cold and damp and the smoke from the fire got in everyone's eyes. I smelt like a kipper. It rained heavily all that first night and water splashed through the open smoke flaps of my tepee onto the stone hearth. The ground was hard and I was cold. I felt middle-aged and cranky and irritable. Is this what I really wanted to be doing?

In the morning we were meant to split our kindling with an axe, light it with newspaper and blow on the embers. I was totally useless and knew the primal feeling of despair and panic that comes from fearing you will never be warm and dry again. I was nearly in tears.

Then what triumph! What pride and smugness when eventually a little plume of smoke arose from my tepee and the big iron kettle was steaming on the grate. I made myself a bowl of exquisite porridge and a pot of tea. It was the first lesson in focusing on the here and now.

I felt decidedly unenthusiastic, however, about going out in the rain on a 'pathwalking meditation' to illustrate the theory that there is an analogy to be made between the pathways we walk in the world and the pathways in our nervous systems. But once I'd put on my boots and started wandering about in the wild wet Welsh countryside it suddenly began to seem more profound and symbolic.

So here I was with three other apprentice witches sitting round the fire eating a vegetarian stew. We droned some tuneless chants and banged on some drums... I smelt like a kipper

I became aware how much I depend on the pathways other people have already made, of how hard it is for me to go into dense woods when I'm not sure of the way through, of how frightened I am of becoming lost. But then I thought about how important ancient paths are for knowledge, communication, survival. How exciting to cut a brand new trail of my own where perhaps no one had ever been before. Danger may lurk off the beaten track but also adventure and discovery.

The metaphors came thick and fast. After hacking through some impenetrable boggy area, what a relief to come upon a recognizable path. How easy to blast your way insensitively rather than to go gently with care and consideration. The paths we create in our minds, ways of thinking, are indeed like the external pathways of the world. Circuitous routes are often better than straight ones, especially uphill. Different perspectives are visible from different paths...

Anna, the witch, had made her point: that metaphors and personal experience have always been the most effective means of teaching the pathways of knowledge and that apprenticeship to the mysteries of ancient wisdom begins with putting your feet on the path. Some of the places you go will be very old tracks laid down since the 'dreamtime', others will be your own. All are valid. At the end of the day I felt my senses were sharper and my awareness

ILLUSTRATIONS: ALAN HUGHES FROM PHOTOS BY ALLEGRA TAYLOR

keener than before. I also felt humbler and more receptive.

There's something about modern life that makes you think you can learn everything *quickly*, greedily – get a video, have a briefing, hire an expert – but taking time to do things slowly alters your perceptions and creates the possibility for the unexpected to slip in between your heartbeats.

Magic is not about power over other people, it is about calling forth your own power from within. It is about being an instrument in the divine orchestra. The reason old people are good at it is that it takes a long time to learn – many seasons of observation, many life experiences to make the connections. We cannot cause change without changing ourselves. We become the power that we call forth.

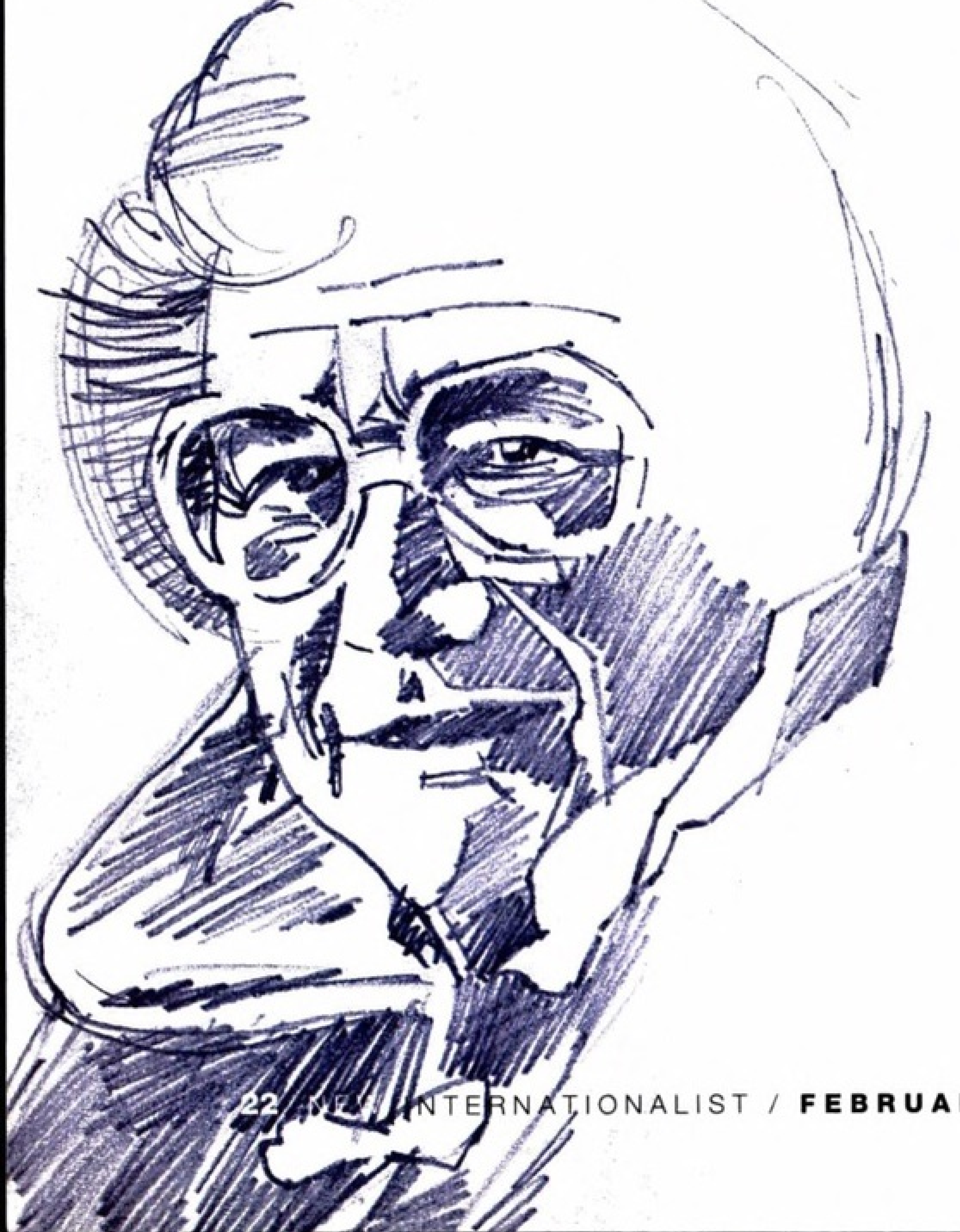
All of us have this ability and demons are nothing but our fears. They can be conquered by naming them.

Thus began my adventure. It was a good place to start. Anna had reminded me of the value of patience, receptivity, trust and surrender. I blew all my publisher's advance on a round-the-world ticket and waved goodbye to my family.

Leaving home turned out to be so much harder than I thought it would be. My whole centre of gravity was altered. Everything was turned inside out. I was consciously trying to let go of what felt safe, comfortable and sure in order to allow new possibilities to unfold.

I was away for five months, travelling on a shoestring, and many times felt homesick and scared but as time went by and I named my demons I became less lonely and more at ease with my own company.

Everywhere I went I talked to older women in different cultural contexts asking what was good and what was bad about growing old. I met women of the 'Third World', women of the 'New Age'. I met ordinary women and rare ones, artists and prophets, housewives and mystics, rich and poor, educated and illiterate. I listened to their stories and told mine, sharing the pains and the pleasures of ageing, exchanging views and life experiences. I stayed with an Apache cattle rancher in Arizona, a Kumina priestess in Jamaica, a village midwife in India and an Aboriginal great-grandmother in the Western Desert of Australia. I tracked down an elderly cousin of my father's – a holocaust survivor – in Israel. I met an inspiring Tibetan holy woman. And towards the end of my odyssey, I found myself in the Cook Islands in the South Pacific...



Rarotonga is the archetypal fantasy island. The stuff of dreams. In the centre, the razorback emerald mountains covered in dense jungle, all around the edge the washing-powder white surf breaking on the coral reef. I believe that somewhere in the collective unconscious, the illusion of an oceanic Eden, an island paradise, a garden of abundance and innocence shimmers like something once known and still remembered. As I looked out toward the horizon, the sensation of recognition was very haunting. It flickered like a fish beneath the surface of my mind and felt like this once was home. Maybe the ancient Homeric legends of heroes and goddesses and ocean voyages are common to all of us.

There's something about modern life that makes you think you can learn everything *quickly*, greedily, but taking time to do things slowly creates the possibility for the unexpected to slip in between your heartbeats

I stayed with Dorice, an hereditary chief of the Cook Islands. Polynesian society is matrilineal and famous for its strong women. Of all the places I went to on my travels this was the one I least wanted to leave and the person I came closest to was Dorice's adopted mother, Paddy. We swam together most days and some of our loveliest conversations took place floating on our backs side-by-side in the lagoon where it seemed easier, somehow, to exchange the confidences and intimacies of two grandmothers trying to come to terms with ageing.

Paddy is a beautiful woman with golden skin and hair the colour of moonlight. It is hard to believe she has a son in his fifties.

Paddy is the epitome of a Pacific woman. Born and raised in Samoa of a Samoan mother and a New Zealand father, she is the product of the coming-together of two cultures. She brought up her family in New Zealand and came to Rarotonga to live after her husband died six years ago. We wrestled with the questions: How can older women best find a role for themselves? How can they give expression to the power, the knowledge and the wisdom of a lifetime?

Older Polynesian women, said Paddy, have always been treated with a great deal of respect so this is as good a place as you could find to grow old in. 'The pluses of ageing are the increased courage to be yourself. You don't have to be what other people want you to be. You don't have to conform. You can develop the courage to stand alone. What do you have to lose? Also, being here, close to nature, my relationship with "the mystery", with "the creator", has become more profound. I've learned to be still, to be meditative. I have an increasingly strong sense of the power of the universe and that we are conduits for that power when we open ourselves.'

But it is also a time of life not without pain. 'I am still frightened at night. I feel very vulnerable, particularly when we have storms and the wind howls and the sea comes surging up. I am far from my children. I miss my grandchildren and I don't have a man in my life. The truth is that the loss of sex, of touch, of tenderness is a great sadness and, yes, I miss it, although Pacific island people hug and kiss each other quite naturally so perhaps it is less acute here than in some other parts of the world.'

In my own quest on this journey I constantly asked myself: 'What sort of old woman do I want to be?' I asked Paddy the same question. 'I value the sense my mother gave me of my Samoan-ness', she said. 'I have a concept of "bigness" that I would like to achieve; big as opposed to petty; generous of heart. You have to be very careful when you are older not to be judgemental. The simplicity and tranquillity of my life here gives me a sense of harmony and connectedness. Being connected both forwards and backwards in time, both up and down to heaven and earth, and heart-to-heart to all other beings. As I see it, this is the only way to avoid the *fear* of ageing. If you're growing outwards there's no room for fear because you're expanding into whatever comes next, you're welcoming the change rather than trying to hang onto the past.'

On my last morning in Rarotonga I did my *t'ai-chi* as usual at the edge of the lagoon and a heron came to keep me company. He stood in the surf a few feet away and watched until the very end; then he lifted off on his huge wings and flapped away into the rising sun. ■

Allegra Taylor is the author of many books, including *Older than Time* (Aquarian Press 1993), about the journey described in this piece.

As families migrate to the fast-paced glitz of the cities, the wisdom of their older members is deemed irrelevant. **Jeremy Seabrook** reports from South-East Asia.

Stranded in Hamburgerland

McDonald's. Jakarta. A family sits around the formica table. Two heads bend together, contemplating the problem in hand. One black-haired, one white, both intent. The girl is showing her grandfather how to prise open the polystyrene packet in which the hamburger nestles.

In Bangkok, a bewildered grandmother grapples with a pocket computer game, laughing as the little figures move too fast, trying to grasp the technology that means so much to her grandchildren.

The young have become teachers in another culture, interpreters of a language the old do not understand, guides in a landscape they have never seen.

As the new generation takes its instruction from the modern world, it listens to different voices, sounds and signals in the air, which are, more often than not, the

Modernization's new recruits – still starry-eyed about consumerism (above). Sitting pretty: but the rickshaw-drivers are used up after 10 years (below).

PREVIOUS PAGE: CHRIS STOWERS / PANOS PICTURES; ABOVE: JEREMY HARTLEY / OXFAM; RIGHT: IAN BERRY / MAGNUM

voices of transnational media conglomerates. The voices of their own people, their old people, are increasingly drowned out. In the process, the transmission of culture from old to young breaks down.

It is doubly unfortunate that this should be occurring at the very moment when more and more people in the South are living to be elderly, if not yet very old. For here we see a repeat of Western experience: as the population ages, so age becomes more commonplace, and at the same time, its store of wisdom is degraded and devalued.

Ultimately, the old find themselves repeating their stories and their memories to a bored and uninterested youth. The young know that their lives will never be like that, and therefore they feel they have little to learn from their grandparents. At best, they will collect the old people's stories on tape as curiosities of folk wisdom, of herbal medicine, starvation foods, picturesque archaic practices surrounding birth, sickness or death.

The old, then, eventually become migrants, stranded in another culture, which is the modern world. No longer seen as a resource, they become a problem, as in the West. Now that 'over-population' is seen by the West as one of the major scourges of an overcrowded planet, it is not the elderly of the earth who will be treated with the greatest tenderness. Old age has become unproductive, barren, like the earth so many people no longer cultivate, fields taken out of production.

The young do not listen. They are too busy listening to those other voices, the beguiling messages of perpetual indulgence from the industries of mass consumption. In the process, it is only to be expected that they will increasingly ignore the sombre admonitions of their elders that life is hard, grudging and poor. The instruction which has enabled generations of peasants to survive falters in the presence of a global market which spills out its riches before young people who have left the land to live in the city. Although many remain poor, they live in daily contact with the imagery of affluence and luxury which tells them that what you need for survival now is not cunning and tenacity, not wisdom and prudence, but money.

In the cities the earning capacity of the elderly in a cash economy is far inferior to that of their young and in this sense they are doubly disadvantaged. Migration for them is more traumatic: it is their sensibility, formed by and for agriculture, that must be more or less violently reworked as they seek to adapt to city life. The old may look after grandchildren or work in the informal economy, but it is the young – always more flexible and adaptable – who readily accept the new rigours of the factory and the sweatshop.

Rarely do you find anyone over 30 in Bangkok's small row-house garment factories where young women work 14 or 15 hours a day for five or six dollars, sleep in cramped, tiny dormitories and are almost all unmarried.

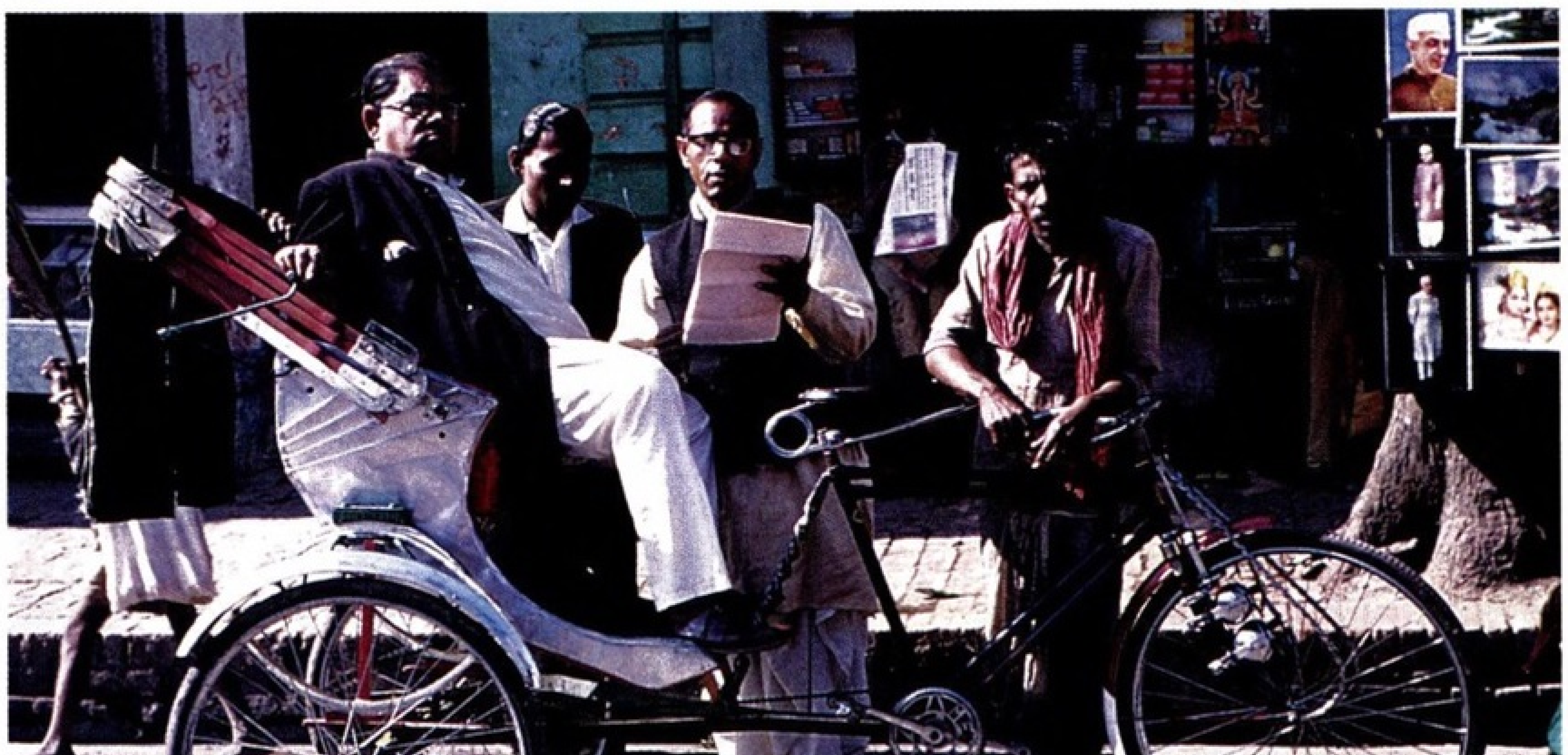
In the city poverty and age have other aspects too. Like the workers in factory sweatshops, those who work as cycle-rickshaw drivers in Dhaka or Calcutta become prematurely aged. Most cannot work more than 10 or 15 years drawing a cycle-rickshaw. They become used up, their bodies exhausted, their energy wasted. I am constantly surprised, when talking to women who have worked in a Bangkok sweatshop for 10 years, to discover that they are still under 30, when they have the appearance to me of being well into middle age. Similarly, rickshaw drivers who look thin and aged, I discover to be younger than I am.

In the Dhaka slum of Mirpur I met a young man of about 26. His name is Mohammed Idris and he has been a rickshaw puller since he was 17. He had developed breathing problems – possibly TB – and had gone to Rajasthan in India to seek a cure at the shrine of a holy man. He had then worked in New Delhi as a cycle-rickshaw *wala.*

Now, he works for only six hours a day. He cannot work the full day because he does not have the strength. 'We cannot take in enough for our bodies to keep them strong. Every day, I feel my strength becoming less.' He looked at me searchingly; beneath the mass of curly hair, the smile, the face was yellowish, debilitated, the skin stretched on its fine bone structure.

With a shock I realized that I was actually looking into the face of old age, a human being used up before his time; a man not yet married, on the threshold of life, yet looking at me with sad old eyes, like one at the end of it. He says that no rickshaw driver can work more than eight or ten years; some do, of course, because they have no choice. You can see them, in the afternoon, in the shade of the trees, sleeping longer in the afternoon heat, unable to pedal the distances to earn the fare, sleeping the sleep, not of idleness but of utter exhaustion.

In the past, when old age was comparatively rare in the South, it was regarded as a fund of experience, accumulated knowledge and wisdom. As such, the old, at least in indigenous societies, were often objects of respect, their survival something to vener-



ate. In such societies, where human memory was the principal source of knowledge, those who lived longest had the most to tell. It was they who transmitted the stories and passed on the values, the sense of continuity of the group, the know-how to cope with hunger, loss and adversity. Because of these, what they knew became part and parcel of the struggle for survival of the next generation. Of course, the young have always rebelled against the authority and control of their elders, have felt impatience at their caution and conservatism, but this has not necessarily impaired either the power or the wisdom of the aged.

Today, longevity brings with it a strange paradox: while twentieth-century development has brought with it the gift of long life, other aspects of that development threaten to prevent both the elderly and the young from enjoying the years that they have in security and dignity.

Rejoicing over the lengthening of life in the South is likely to be short-lived; a glance at the position of the old in the West explains why. There, long life has become a purposely technological feat; the old are disempowered, functionless and dependent. They are also infantilized. The staff of nursing homes and old people's homes routinely talk to their residents as 'good girls' and 'naughty boys'. In the West, it is now the fate of the majority to become old without becoming wise. And if they do become wise, that wisdom is not recognized by those who do not even know what wisdom is. This is a terrible fate; in its way, as much a denial of humanity as premature and avoidable death. ■

Writer **Jeremy Seabrook** is currently working on a book on Asian megacities to be published by Verso.

Gek's rebellion

Perhaps real-estate developers and their thugs thought it would be easy to get rid of the old peasant woman who grew vegetables on the piece of land they wanted. Perhaps they were wrong...

GEK SIM is now nearly 60. She lives at Ayer Itam on Penang Island in Malaysia. Her family came from China 70 years ago, driven by poverty. They settled in what was then wasteland, but proved to be fertile agricultural land where they grew vegetables for sale in the markets of Penang. Her father built the house, originally of wood, but over the years this was enlarged and reconstructed into a spacious structure of concrete and corrugated metal. The family became moderately prosperous, growing leaf vegetables for local consumption; they were never rich but gained a secure sufficiency.

Since that time, Penang has become a major tourist destination and is now studded with golf courses. With the future of Hong Kong uncertain, many rich Taiwanese and Japanese now own apartments in high-rise condominiums. The island is becoming more and more urbanized.

The vegetable growers from Ayer Itam became an obstacle to the development of real estate. Over the years they all left, persuaded, bribed or threatened by developers. Gek Sim refused to go. Her piece of ground – shaded by fruit trees, close to the Chinese cemetery, where birds and butterflies were once plentiful – has been encroached upon; her livelihood has been eroded, her vegetable garden reduced to a small plot, where she grows only enough for her family's needs. But she will not leave.

Her rusty roofed house now looks shabby, diminished by the 15-storey apartment blocks that were constructed on the gardens of her neighbours. I first met her four years ago, when the flats were being built. Pieces of concrete, bricks and stones regularly peppered her roof, sometimes piercing the metal and narrowly missing her grandchildren. But she would not go.

'My grandfather was allowed to farm freely here. It was unused land. They simply came and squatted. No-one suggested to them that the land belonged to anyone else.' Gek Sim was growing vegetables from the age of ten, after five years of schooling. The vegetables – *kangkong*, cabbage, spinach, *chai si* – were sold to intermediaries. That is why they never became rich. But they kept pigs and chickens, and the garden fed the whole family.

Your land for our money: developers bully but Gek Sim refuses to leave.

JEREMY SEABROOK

A developer bought the land from the clan which later claimed ownership. Gek Sim heard from her neighbours that the land was to be used for building. They were never formally told. People began to move out. Their houses were demolished with bulldozers, their vegetables crushed. Compensation was promised.

At that time the Consumers' Association of Penang – one of the most vibrant and inventive of all voluntary organizations in the South – took up the issue. Some of its activists stood with the people in front of the bulldozers and halted the demolitions. One man in a neighbouring hamlet was shot dead during the demonstrations. The developers threatened those who would not move. Gangsters came to frighten them. After the shooting everyone was scared.

As the building began to take shape, all Gek Sim's neighbours moved out. She remained and with the help of the Consumers' Association, took out an injunction against the developers in defence of the land she considered her own. The case was won in the High Court; it is still pending in the Supreme Court 11 years later.

Gek Sim still considers herself a vegetable grower: but now she works on land that she has leased from someone else. Not only does she farm, but she takes care of her grandchildren while her children work. She says: 'I am a farmer. That is the life I know. That is what I will do until I am no longer capable.'

Her house has been attacked. Sometimes, in the night, people throw bricks. There is, she says, no point in reporting it to the police. Nothing will be done. 'They want the land. The owners sent someone to see me. They asked me how much I would take in compensation. They do not understand. They see land as money, not as something that yields food. I don't want to leave. It is my land. It isn't money I want, it is land.'

Gek Sim comes out to say goodbye: some bright green leaves of spinach in the rich earth; chickens foraging in the untidy yard; a plantain and a papaya tree. Behind, the blank, soaring, concrete cliff of the new apartments.

Jeremy Seabrook

Simply.. AGEING MYTHS
Long lasting leisurely sex!
No kids. No contraceptive worries
I fancy him!
Hmm.. I think the jolly ones are more fun in bed.
Myth 6 Old people don't have sex
Now last Saturday I tell a lie it was Wednesday No! Tuesday – anyway I said.. no it was Thursday...
Myth 7 Old people are boring and forgetful
Please note - people can be boring and forgetful at any age
Send the troops in! I'm ordering an invasion!
ARMS ARE FOR HUGGING
GIVE BACK OUR SONS LIVES
Unfortunately wisdom doesn't always come with age
Myth 5 Old people are weak and helpless
Myth 4 Old people are sweet and kind and at peace with the world
Myth 3 Sickness and disability come with age
Never been fitter! I can touch my toes you know
That must be nice for you
You're out of date! Let me teach you new ways
If you let me teach you how to integrate them wisely
She's hopeful! Ooops, pardon me for being youngist
FERTILIZER
Myth 2 Modernization is good for old people
I'm older than you
Well you'll get ageism before me won't you?
Myth 1 We will never be old ourselves

We young people can't be expected to keep supporting an increasing aged population you know
I wish you did support me! How about swapping jobs and you do heavy manual work and I get paid better?
Myth 8
Old people are unproductive
I'd like a holiday but I look after my daughters' children while she's out at work. Anyway I can't afford one
Unpaid of course!
Dad says you know more about our history than anyone else and it's not written down so I've got to listen carefully
Myth 9
Old women are a burden on every-one
When I was a boy of 60, forty years ago... I was much stronger. I'd like more rest nowadays but I need the money
VILCABAMBA
VALLEY OF THE AGED
Oldest inhabitant 131 years old
Potosi
the Mouth of HELL
many people die by 35
Myth 10
Old age begins at 60
Myth 11
Old people don't have feelings
Granny this tree is really old and wrinkly! Isn't it beautiful?
Myth 12
Old people are past being consulted about anything, including their own lives
ANTI WRINKLE CREAM
Please put your ageist attitudes in here.
©Quillin.

ILLUSTRATION: VIV QUILLIN

The remains of the feast

Rukmini, aged 90, did not behave quite as you would expect an old Brahmin widow to behave in the twilight of her life... A short story by **Gita Hariharan**

THE room still smells of her. Not as she did when she was dying, an overripe smell that clung to everything that had touched her, sheets, saris, hands. The room now smells like a pressed, faded rose. A dry elusive smell. Burnt, a candle put out.

We were not exactly room-mates, but we shared two rooms, one corner of the old ancestral house, all my 20-year-old life.

She was Rukmini, my great-grandmother. She was 90 when she died last month, outliving by 10 years her only son and daughter-in-law. I don't know how she felt then, but later she seemed to find something slightly hilarious about it all. That she, an ignorant village-bred woman who signed the papers my father brought her with a thumbprint, should survive; while they, city-bred, ambitious, should collapse of weak hearts and arthritic knees at the first sign of old age.

Her sense of humour was always quaint. It could also be embarrassing. She would sit in her corner, her round plump face reddening, giggling like a little girl. I knew better than to ask her why; I was a teenager by then. But some uninitiated friend would be unable to resist and would ask her why she was laughing. This, I knew, would send her into uncontrollable peals. The tears would flow down her cheeks and finally, catching her breath, still weak with laughter, she would confess.

She could fart exactly like a train whistling its way out of the stations and it gave her as much joy as a child would get when she saw, or heard, a train.

She was cheerful and never sick. But she was also undeniably old, and so it was not a great surprise to us when she suddenly took to lying in bed all day a few weeks before her ninetieth birthday.

She had been lying in bed for close to two months, ignoring concern, advice, scolding and then she suddenly gave up. She agreed to see a doctor.

The young doctor came out of her room, his face puzzled and angry. My father begged him to sit down and drink a cup of coffee.

'She will need all kinds of tests,' he announced. 'How long has she had that lump on her neck? Have you had it checked?'

My father shifted uneasily in his cane chair. He is a cadaverous-looking man, prone to nervousness and sweating. He keeps a big jar of antacids on his office desk. He has a nine-to-five accountant's job in a government-owned company, the kind that never fires its employees.

My father pulled out the small towel he uses in place of a handkerchief. Wiping his forehead, he mumbled: 'You know how these old women are. Impossible to argue with them.'

'The neck,' the doctor said, more gently. I could see he pitied my father.

'I think it was examined once, long ago. My father was alive then. There was supposed to have been an operation, I think. But you know what they thought in those days. An operation meant unnatural death. All the relatives came over to scare her, advise her with horror stories. So she said no. You know how it is. And she was already a widow then, my father was the head of the household. How could he, a 14-year-old boy, take the responsibility?'

'Well,' said the doctor. He shrugged his shoulders. 'Let me know when you want me to admit her in my nursing home. But I suppose it's better to let her die at home.'

When the doctor left, we looked at each other, the three of us, like shifty accomplices. My mother, practical as always, broke the silence and said, 'Let's not tell her anything. Why worry her?'

But when I went into her room that night, my great-grandmother had a sly look on her face. 'Come here, Ratna,' she said. 'Come here, my darling, my little gem.'

I went, my heart quaking at the thought of telling her.

She held my hand and kissed each finger, her half-closed eyes almost flirtatious. 'Tell me something, Ratna,' she began in a wheedling voice.

'I don't know, I don't know anything about it,' I said quickly.

'Of course you do.' She was surprised, a little annoyed. 'Those small cakes you got from the Christian shop that day. Do they have eggs in them?'

'Do they?' she persisted. 'Will you,' and her eyes narrowed with cunning, 'will you get one for me?'

So we began a strange partnership, my great-grandmother and I. I smuggled cakes

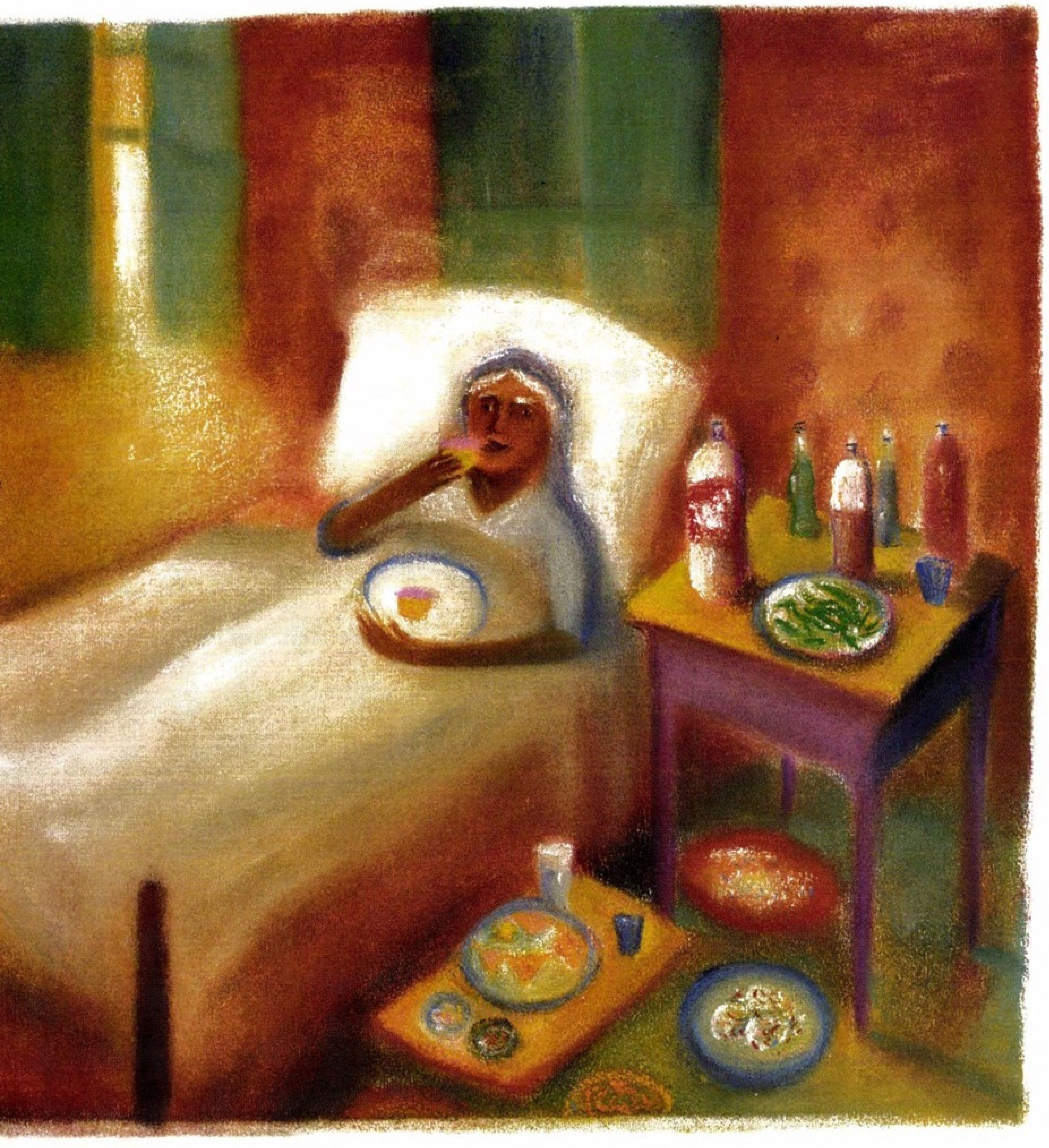


ILLUSTRATION: LIZ PYLE

and ice-cream, biscuits and samosas, made by non-Brahmin hands, into a vegetarian invalid's room. To the deathbed of a Brahmin widow who had never eaten anything but pure home-cooked food for almost a century.

Our secret was safe for about a week. Then she became bold. She was bored with cakes, she said. They gave her heartburn. She became a little more adventurous every day. Her cravings were various and unpredictable. Laughable and always urgent.

'I'm thirsty,' she moaned, when my mother asked her if she wanted anything. 'No, no I don't want water, I don't want juice.' She stopped the moaning and looked at my mother's patient exasperated face. 'I'll tell you what I want,' she whined. 'Get me a glass of that brown drink Ratna bought in the bottle. The kind that bubbles and makes a popping sound when you open the bottle. The one with the fizzy noise as you pour it out.'

'A Coca-Cola?' said my mother, shocked. 'Don't be silly, it will make you sick.'

'I don't care what it is called. I want it.'

So she got it and my mother poured out a small glass, tight-lipped and gave it to her without a word. She was always a dutiful granddaughter-in-law.

'Ah,' sighed my great-grandmother, propped up against her pillows, the steel tumbler lifted high over her lips. The lump on her neck moved in little gurgles as she drank. Then she burped a loud contented burp and asked, as if she had just thought of it, 'Do you think there is something in it? You, know, alcohol?'

A month later, we had got used to her new unexpected inappropriate demands. She had tasted, by now, lemon tarts, garlic, three types of aerated drinks, fruit cake laced with brandy, bhel-puri from the fly-infested bazaar nearby.

'There's going to be trouble,' my mother kept muttering under her breath. 'She's losing her mind, she is going to be a lot of trouble.'

And she was right of course.

My grandmother was in the nursing home for 10 whole days. My mother and I took turns sitting by her, sleeping on the floor by the hospital cot.

The day she died, she kept searching the room with her eyes. Her arms were held down by the tubes and needles, criss-cross, in-out. Her hands clenched and unclenched with the effort and she whispered, like a miracle: 'Ratna'.

My mother and I rushed to her bedside. The muscles on her face twitched. Then she pulled one arm free of the tubes in a sudden crazy spurt of strength and the IV pole crashed to the floor:

'Bring me a red sari,' she screamed. 'A red one with a big wide border of gold.' And her voice cracked. 'Bring me peanuts with chilli powder from the corner shop. Onion and green chilli bondas deep-fried in oil.'

When we brought the body home – I am not yet a doctor and already I can call her that – I looked at the stiff cold body that I was seeing naked for the first time. She was asleep at last, quiet at last. I had learnt, in the last month or two, to expect the unexpected from her. I waited in case she changed her mind and sat up, remembering one more taboo food to be tasted.

But she lay still, the wads of cotton in her nostrils and ears shutting us out. Shutting out her belated ardour.

I ran to my cupboard and brought her the brightest reddest sari I could find; last year's Divali sari, my first silk. I unfolded it, ignoring my mother's eyes which were turning aghast. I covered her naked body lovingly. The red silk glittered like her childish laughter.

'Have you gone mad?' my mother whispered furiously. 'She was a sick old woman, she didn't know what she was saying.' She rolled up the sari and flung it aside, as if it had been polluted.

They burnt her in a pale brown sari, in widow's weeds. The prayer beads I had never seen her touch encircled the bulging obscene neck.

She has left me behind with nothing but a smell. I haunt the dirtiest bakeries and tea-stalls I can find every evening. I search for her, my sweet great-grandmother, in plate after plate of stale confections, in needle-sharp green chillies deep-fried in rancid oil. I plot her revenge for her. I give myself diarrhoea for a week.

Then I open all the windows and her cupboard and air the rooms. I tear her dirty grey saris to shreds. I line the shelves of her empty cupboard with my thick, newly-bought gloss-jacketed texts. They stand straight and solid, row after row of armed soldiers. They fill up the small cupboard in minutes. ■

The Remains of the Feast by **Gita Hariharan**, from *In Other Words: new writing by Indian Women*, edited by Urvashi Butalia and Ritu Menon, published by The Women's Press Limited, 34, Great Sutton Street, London EC1V 0DX, England, and used with their permission. First published in India by Kali for Women.

ALSO WORTH READING ON...

Ageing

The World Aging Situation 1991 (United Nations) is a thorough overview, with case studies as well as statistics. **Ageing – debates on demographic transition and social policy** by Kasturi Sen (Zed Press, 1994) gives an overview of the issues and the literature worldwide. **Ageing in Developing Countries** by Ken Tout (Oxford University Press 1989) is a classic, with anecdotal evidence to support the arguments. **Humanity comes of Age** by Suzanne S Paul and James A Paul (WCC Publications 1994) is a readable argument for change and has a good final chapter on the ageing movement. **Ageing and Later Life** by Julia Johnson and Robert Slater (Sage Publications, 1993) is a reader with a whole range of angles from fiction to health, retirement and politics. Intergenerational work in Britain is illustrated in **Generation to Generation: Linking schools with older people** by Maureen O'Connor (Cassell Educational Ltd 1993). **Growing Old Disgracefully: new ideas for getting the most out of life,** The Hen Co-op (Piatikus 1993) is written by a group of older British and American women in order to challenge ideas of what it was like to grow old. **The Fountain of Age** (Vintage 1993) is Betty Friedan's salvo on ageing in America. **Two Old Women** by Velma Wallis (Women's Press 1994) is an Alaskan legend of survival. Finally **The Raging Grannies Songbook** (New Society, 1993) is there for those who want to protest and sing!

Organizations

Below are some national organizations but there will be some local ones near you.

AOTEAROA/NEW ZEALAND **Age Concern, PO Box 1930, Wellington.** Local autonomous councils providing advocacy and services for older people. **Grey Power, PO Box 6026, Wellesley Street, Auckland.** A political lobbying group on elderly issues.

AUSTRALIA **New South Wales Council on Ageing, 34 Argyle Place, Miller's Point, NSW 2000.** (branches in other states), A wide-ranging community-based group. Lobbying and education work. **Pensioners' and Superannuants' Associations. Suite 62, Level 6, Kippax Street, Surry Hills, NSW 2010** (national and state). A federation of consumer groups providing education and resources, and lobbying government and industry.

BRITAIN **Age Concern, Astral House, 1268 London Road London SW16 4ER.** A network of national and local organizations. Support and care for older people. **HelpAge International, St James's Walk, Clerkenwell Green, London EC1R OBE.** A federation enabling over 40 non-governmental organizations in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Europe and North America to work with and for older people. **Help the Aged (UK)** (address as for HelpAge International) runs a range of services, including campaigning work and national advice lines.

CANADA **One Voice, 1005-350 Sparks Street, Ottawa, Ontario, KIR 758.** Membership organization advocating old people's rights. **Positive Aging, 148 May Street North, Box 9, Thunder Bay, Ontario, T7C 5V4.** Grassroots organization producing a newsletter *The Page.*

UNITED STATES **American Association of Retired Persons, 601 E Street, NW, Washington DC 20049.** A membership organization which lobbies on a whole range of issues and publishes *Modern Maturity* and *Network News: a Newsletter of the Global Link for Midlife and Older Women.* **American Society on Aging, 833 Market Street, Room 511, San Francisco CA 94103-1824.** More academic. Produces *Generations,* a journal with articles by different experts.

Coming of age in Conchali

Getting old means getting bold in this Santiago suburb

'WHEN I was a girl I never went out or did anything. But now, at 63, I've changed completely. If anyone says let's go somewhere, I go. I'm really enjoying myself.'

Pilar is part of a network of older women in the marginal borough of Conchali to the north of Santiago in Chile. This network grew from a nucleus of 10 older women who decided they wanted to do something for themselves and their community. They were trained as *promotoras,* or community workers, by the *Instituto de la Mujer,* a women's group in the capital, and have been busy organizing the community via older women's groups ever since.

Lidia is in her sixties and is one of the original 10. She began as a *promotora* by carrying out a survey to find other women of her age. Lidia says: 'We started just by talking through our problems and I began to run some relaxation sessions from what I'd been taught. For a while that was all we did. Then they said they wanted to do some more, so we got started.'

Lidia has been helping older women to come to terms with their approaching old age, by holding discussions on a whole range of subjects, including the role of older people, health care, basic rights and sexuality. The women are then equipped to work in the community with others – both young and old.

INSTITUTO DE LA MUJER

Green fingers: planting herbs that will be made into traditional medicines.

Laura was one of the first *promotoras* to be trained. She found that her skills as a gardener and farmer were much in demand. So she started small-scale farming sessions, creating rooftop gardens in the densely-populated borough.

Once a week over 20 older women meet and learn about seeds, watering, transplanting and making bedding materials. Some are now growing their own vegetables. One of the group, Eliana, has even bigger ideas. She is planning a small business based on market gardening and is training other women in her new-found skills. 'Our wish is to have an organic kitchen garden. We'll grow lettuce, spinach, tomatoes and squash and we'll contribute to the community with our healthy produce.'

The women are combining their new skills with their knowledge of traditional medicines, making herbal cures and giving talks to health workers, community groups and younger people.

Geraldina has set up a theatre group which regularly performs at schools and hospitals, teaching children that older people aren't dull or worthless. The group has also worked with younger women such as Patricia, who says: 'My experience of working with older women has been great because I've met people full of motivation to do things, and they do them with a love of life and a very positive attitude.'

Personal development, alongside community organization and involvement, has been the key to the mushrooming of the older women's network. Germania speaks for many when she describes her thoughts on her involvement. 'I came with the idea of learning and that's what I've done. And one of the things that has helped me most is having more self-confidence.' Germania is now a representative on an older people's parliament which has been formed in the area. With one in 10 of the population over 60, who knows who might start calling the shots in Conchali?

Katrina Payne is a freelance writer.

The NI Interview with

Herbert de Souza

Alex Shankland meets the man whom many think of as the conscience of modern Brazil.

'Brazil is Paradise for a minority, Purgatory for most people and Hell for 20 per cent of the population.' Herbert de Souza has a flair for language. Christian images are interspersed with rhetoric, statistics and an unshakeable moral determination to ram home unpalatable truths. This mixture has made him the leading analyst of Brazil's tortured history of 'development'. In 1992 he burst out of the academic ghetto, sparking an extraordinary national campaign against hunger and poverty. The crusade, known officially by the cumbersome title 'Citizen's Action Against Poverty and Hunger and for Life', is known unofficially as 'Betinho's Campaign'.

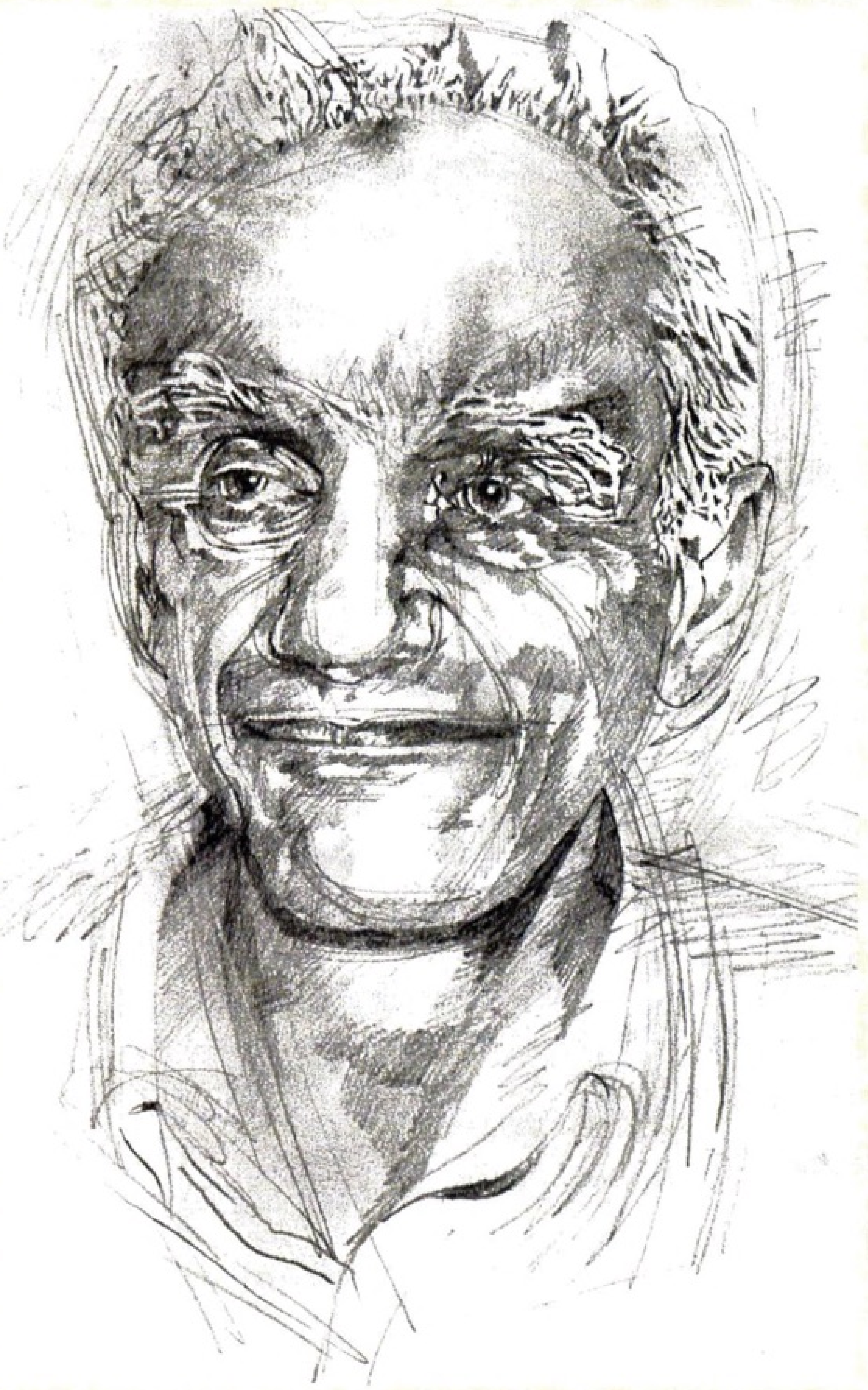


ILLUSTRATION: ALAN HUGHES

De Souza, affectionately known as 'Betinho', has become a kind of conscience for Brazil. Start a conversation with him and you will find it littered with paradoxes. Some are raised provocatively and then left hanging in the air. Others are teased apart playfully by his formidable intellect.

One paradox overshadows them all. Betinho tested HIV-positive in 1985 and AIDS has already killed his two brothers. Yet he speaks of this apparent death sentence as 'liberating' – infusing his own struggle for life and his war on social injustice with an intense contagious optimism.

Betinho has a faith in people's ability to change their minds. 'When I was a Maoist I believed power grew from the barrel of a gun; later I realized that power really lies in the growth of awareness.' For him Brazil is still largely trapped in the legacy of a dictatorship which 'perverted the state, intimidated the spirit of citizenship and destroyed society's self-confidence'. But he himself has moved on from what he calls the 'period of collective madness' – the 1960s and 1970s, when he was forced underground and then into exile.

He rejects the criticism of left-wing traditionalists that his campaign to collect food for 32 million hungry Brazilians is simply 'papering over the cracks'. Instead he stresses: 'I've learned much more during this campaign than I did as a militant of the Left. Without the practice of change, the rhetoric of change is meaningless.'

The hunger campaign is run out of the offices of IBASE – the Brazilian Institute for Social and Economic Analysis – which is the non-governmental organization that de Souza helped start up after his return from exile. But decentralization is the key word for the campaign. Local committees are completely independent and they emphasize rapid collection and distribution, not strategic planning and accumulation. For as Betinho points out, 'accumulation breeds inertia and corruption and hunger is an emergency'.

Results have been impressive. The number of local committees is now over 3,000 and it is estimated that 32 per cent of all Brazilians have donated food, money or clothing to the drive. Donations have come from the most unlikely sources, including the inmates of Rio's prisons.

Although Betinho's ideas are responsible for the direction and momentum of the movement he declines the title of Director in favour of National Articulator. Last year he tried to shift the campaign's emphasis from food to jobs, a difficult move. Hunger is one thing, he says. 'But how should a committee set about creating jobs? Do jobs depend on government and business only? Or can citizens contribute something too?' He rejects out of hand the economic argument that job creation requires huge investments.

'If that's what economic theory says, then I say to hell with the theory,' he declares, with a hint of mischief in his eyes. Economic theory is one of his favourite targets. 'A beetle knows nothing about the laws of aerodynamics, but it manages to fly perfectly well.' Betinho believes that economic theory has taken over from nuclear war as one of the most dangerous threats to the modern world. 'It is dragging humanity towards the disaster of social apartheid,' he declares.

The change in the campaign focus from hunger to unemployment marks a shift to addressing root causes – 'for hunger: food; for poverty: work'. Next on Betinho's list is land reform. The hungry in the cities, he notes, are overwhelmingly landless migrants from rural areas. 'The origin of poverty in Brazil is in the countryside.'

The 58-year-old, with his frail, stooped frame, is a magnetic presence for TV cameras, a must in a TV-addicted country like Brazil. His incisive delivery leaves an indelible imprint on the mind of the listener. Brazil's history is full of popular resistance expressed in bloody upsurges which met heroic but inevitable defeat. Betinho's quiet survivor's heroism and imperturbable ability to talk as 'Citizen Betinho' to anyone – from President to slumdweller – differs radically from the model set by generations of dead rebels.

Brazil has a habit of projecting anyone with media presence, from soccer heroes to game-show hosts, into politics. But Betinho swears he won't join the rush. 'The really fundamental changes come from below, from society,' he argues, 'and I wouldn't want to be a prisoner of a party line, of a single set of arguments.' Ever the iconoclast, he grins mischievously and adds: 'After all, I don't want to lose the element of surprise, do I?' ■

Reviews

film

The Wooden Man's Bride
by **Huang Jianxin**

Moving the Mountain
by **Michael Apted**

TORONTO'S ANNUAL FESTIVAL OF FESTIVALS continues to offer an eclectic range of films both from the Third World and about the Third World. Among a myriad of offerings on China this year two films stood out, one historical, the other contemporary.

A historical drama by one of Taiwan's great young film-makers, Huang Jianxin, **The Wooden Man's Bride** is exquisitely acted and beautifully filmed. The setting is a wind-blown nineteenth-century village in the midst of China's arid plains. This is feudal China, chock full of rapacious bandits, struggling peasants and rich, powerful landlords. Wu Kui is a loyal young serf who has been chosen to help carry a spirited bride-to-be to her wedding ceremony. When the procession is attacked by bandits, Wu courageously, though unsuccessfully, defends the woman. Later he returns to the bandits' lair and convinces their leader to release her.

In the meantime, when the groom dies unexpectedly his tradition-bound mother insists the bride be faithful to the young man's carved wooden image. From that point on the film poignantly details the elicit romance between Wu and the bride-to-be across rigid lines of social class. This may sound like a recipe for an Asian soap opera but it is far from that. Engaging, strongly-etched characters turn this into a moving critique of the stultifying prison of cultural tradition.

Where are they now?: The Tiananmen students followed up in Apted's film.

Moving the Mountain by British film-maker Michael Apted is a more contemporary offering. It passionately chronicles the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstration and massacre in Beijing. Apted tells the story through the testimony of five of the key student leaders in the pro-democracy movement – mixing dramatization, documentation, archival footage and straight interviews in a seamless and forceful style. The reconstruction of events leading up to the 4 June arrival of tanks and soldiers in the Square tellingly reveals both the courage and youthful naiveté of the thousands of students from across China who were drawn to the protests.

But the film is more than just interesting history. It is also a gut-wrenching examination of the psychology of political activism. How do those young people who have lived through the tension and tragedy of Tiananmen Square rebuild and refocus their lives after the crackdown? Many of the student leaders are now permanently exiled. Of the five who feature here four are in the US. Most, including Li Lu whose story is the centrepiece of the film, have landed on their feet and are still working for the pro-democracy movement. The son of parents denounced as 'stinking intellectuals' during the Cultural Revolution, Li Lu is an articulate and rigorous critic, destined to be a thorn in the side of the Chinese Government for years to come.

But the terror also had its victims: one woman interviewee tearfully recounts the trauma which has left her emotionally shattered and unwilling to maintain her previous political commitment.

The one student leader in the film who stayed in China is critical of his comrades who left, and Wei Jingsheng, the father of China's democracy movement, claims with hindsight that the Tiananmen students never understood the brutal power of the Chinese state. **Moving the Mountain** is a rare work: both spirited and, inevitably, optimistic. The film ends with a Chinese parable about a farmer who decides to move, stone by stone, a mountain that lies between him and his fields. When his neighbours laugh he replies stoically: 'I have children and they will have children. And there will be more children. And one day the mountain will be moved.'

Politics ☆☆☆
Entertainment ☆☆☆☆

Politics ☆☆☆☆☆
Entertainment ☆☆☆

books

Twentieth-Century South Africa
by **William Beinart**
(Oxford University Press ISBN 0-19-289239-8)

WHILE APARTHEID RULED SOUTH AFRICA it was simple to imagine that we knew roughly what was going on, where we stood and what should be done about it.

Now that apartheid has collapsed it's no longer so obvious. We now have to see the place afresh with eyes less dulled by the awful gloom of apartheid, yet without pretending that it was never there. Rediscovering history is one of the ways we can do this, and William Beinart's meticulous, lively introduction to the story of the South African people through the twentieth century is an excellent place to start.

You quickly discover that there were powerful – and enduring – forces behind the exploitation of black South Africans, orchestrated to deliver great wealth into certain hands. You can see quite clearly, too, the difficulty the architects of apartheid had trying to keep the cities 'white' against a tide of urbanization, or to sustain cheap labour on white-owned farms against relentless demand for expendable human muscle in the mines. In both cases the result was, eventually, an almighty mess.

It would be wrong to conclude from this, however, that the demise of apartheid was engineered entirely by the hidden hand of market forces. Beinart reveals with humour and subtlety the intriguing complexity of South African society and its transformative effect.

SOUTH AFRICA
WILLIAM BEINART
twentieth-century
SOUTH AFRICA
OPUS

Gandhi, who lived here for 20 years at the turn of the century, drew on the established practices of African rural workers to develop *satyagraha*, or 'passive resistance'. And, writes Beinart, though he arrived 'wearing a suit and a turban... He left, at least metaphorically, in a *dhoti*'.

You may be a little bit bemused when you read that sheep-rearing communities in South Africa were 'savaged by the depression, drought and dead sheep'. Could this be a reference to British politician Denis Healey's celebrated description of an attack on him by Conservative minister Sir Geoffrey Howe as 'like being savaged by a dead sheep'?

The book is at once immensely readable, informative and timely, coinciding in South Africa with one of those rare, fleeting moments when there is a shared feeling of human liberation.

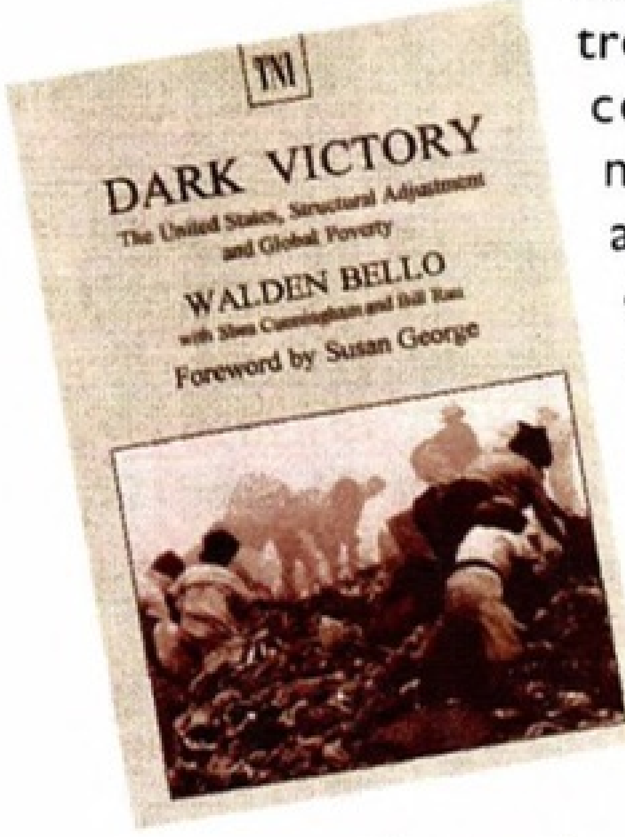
Politics ☆☆☆
Entertainment ☆☆☆☆

Dark Victory

by **Walden Bello** (with **Shea Cunningham** and **Bill Rau**)

(Pluto Press with Food First and
the Transnational Institute
ISBN 0-7453-0834-1)

THIS IS A PUNCHY account of the shift to the free market during the 1980s. Bello focuses on the structural-adjustment programmes (SAPs) imposed by the IMF and the World Bank in exchange for loans to developing countries. This ground will be familiar to many **NI** readers but the book is a useful introduction for students, well illustrated with photographs. Case studies of Chile, Mexico and Ghana show how adjustment leads most often to a vicious circle of worsening poverty.


TNI
DARK VICTORY
The United States, Structural Adjustment and Global Poverty
WALDEN BELLO
with Shea Cunningham and Bill Rau
Foreword by Susan George

Bello's main point is that SAPs have been 'a tremendous success', not in meeting their apparent goal of restoring economic health, but in terms of their broader strategic aim of regaining US global domination – the resubordination of the South to the North.

The Reaganites saw the threat from the South as contributing to the US's economic decline. Both SAPs and trade-policy pressures to open Asian economies to US goods were part of their policy package for recovery. Then, with the collapse of communism the new world order was complete – a 'dark victory', as the book's title suggests.

Bello sees the old choice between socialism and barbarism once again looming, but remains optimistic. He foresees little improvement under Clinton, but gives too much credit to the Reagan administration, implying that it managed a straightforward movement from vision to policy to outcome. The reality was a lot of groping for the right policies.

If any group has gained from the global shift towards free markets, it is Northern banks and financial institutions. Yet Bello pays them surprisingly little attention. The book remains, however, a worthwhile read on the current state of global power.

Politics ☆☆☆
Entertainment ☆☆☆

THE CLASSIC

Saint Joan

...being the film that combines high drama with mental slapstick.

WHAT happens when you put together an unassuming, somewhat camp, closet homosexual heir who doesn't want to be king; advisors who take advantage of this to run the whole royal show; and a religious bureaucracy that controls almost everybody except a young peasant woman who insists that she hears saintly voices and will obey only these?

Part satire and part drama, Otto Preminger's **Saint Joan** is an extraordinary and powerful concoction. The movie seems to be split in half – the first part devoted to fast-paced mental slapstick that introduces the characters and ends with Joan leading the French soldiers. The second half deals with her capture by the English and subsequent trial by the Church inquisitors. These dramatic segments are the best, with some brilliant dialogue written by Graham Greene and riveting acting by Jean Seberg in the role of Joan.

The historical facts are as follows: Joan of Arc was born in France circa 1412, illiterate and – if you believe in the numerous tales of miracles surrounding her – clairvoyant. Listening to orders that she believed came from the Archangel Michael, Saint Catherine and Saint Margaret, she became a soldier to lead an army against the English and to put the French Dauphin Charles on the throne. Joan was captured by the English, tried as a witch and burned at the stake by the Church. She was 19 when she died.

Joan's psychic skills are well displayed in the movie – as when she predicts the death of a man seconds before he keels over. But the French Squire Robert de Baudricourt remains highly sceptical. Joan says: 'I hear voices telling me what to do. They come from God.' He counters: 'They come from your imagination.' Joan instantly replies: 'Of course. That is how the messages of God come to us.' Judging by the historical accounts of Joan's trial she was certainly wise and witty enough to produce such rebuttals.

None of this wins her thanks from the prince she was trying to help. Even after he is crowned, the bumbling King Charles VII is too busy lamenting his finances and his lack of new clothes – his mother the queen uses what paltry clothing allowance they have on herself. At the coronation Charles complains that the holy oil used to anoint him is rancid. Joan harbors no illusions about him. When he asks her if she can turn lead into gold, she retorts that she can turn him into a king although it's a 'miracle that will take some doing'.

Humour aside, the charge of heresy was a most serious one in Joan's time. When a Church inquisitor insists that, 'the voice of God is the voice of the Church' and Joan likewise insists that she will follow none but her own voices, we sweat and agonize with her as she first exhibits her belief in, then doubt of, and finally belief in, her voices. How can she *not* mistrust the Church? The prosecuting inquisitor has warned the council to 'be on your guard against your natural compassion' and tells them: 'If you hate cruelty remember that nothing is so cruel in its consequences as the toleration of heresy.'

This faithful rendering of the mind-games that the Church exercised in its attempts to rid the world of anyone who didn't cringe before it, is one of many such scenes. Tension builds as Joan finds answers to frustrate the prosecutor's every attempt to threaten and humiliate her. The trial seems realistic as well as exciting as the sinister hypocrisy of the Church is revealed toward those who dare to listen to themselves.

I recommend watching **Saint Joan** twice – the first time for the overview and the second time to enjoy the nuances and savour the dialogue. Seberg's stunning performance induces us initially to ask if this young woman is mad or a visionary. But perhaps that is not the right question; after all, the Church never questioned her sanity. It simply wanted her to admit that she was wrong to follow her divine guidance and that it was right in insisting that everybody follow theirs. But by the time we hear Joan's impassioned speech before the Inquisitors – after hearing that they will spare her life only if she agrees to be imprisoned forever away from the natural world she so loves – there can be no question about who is merciful and who is not. 'By your wanting to take the sky, birds and flowers away from me, or from any human creature, I know that your counsel is that of the Devil and mine is of God.' ■

Nina Silver

Saint Joan, directed by Otto Preminger, was released in 1957. Graham Greene wrote the screenplay, based on George Bernard Shaw's play.

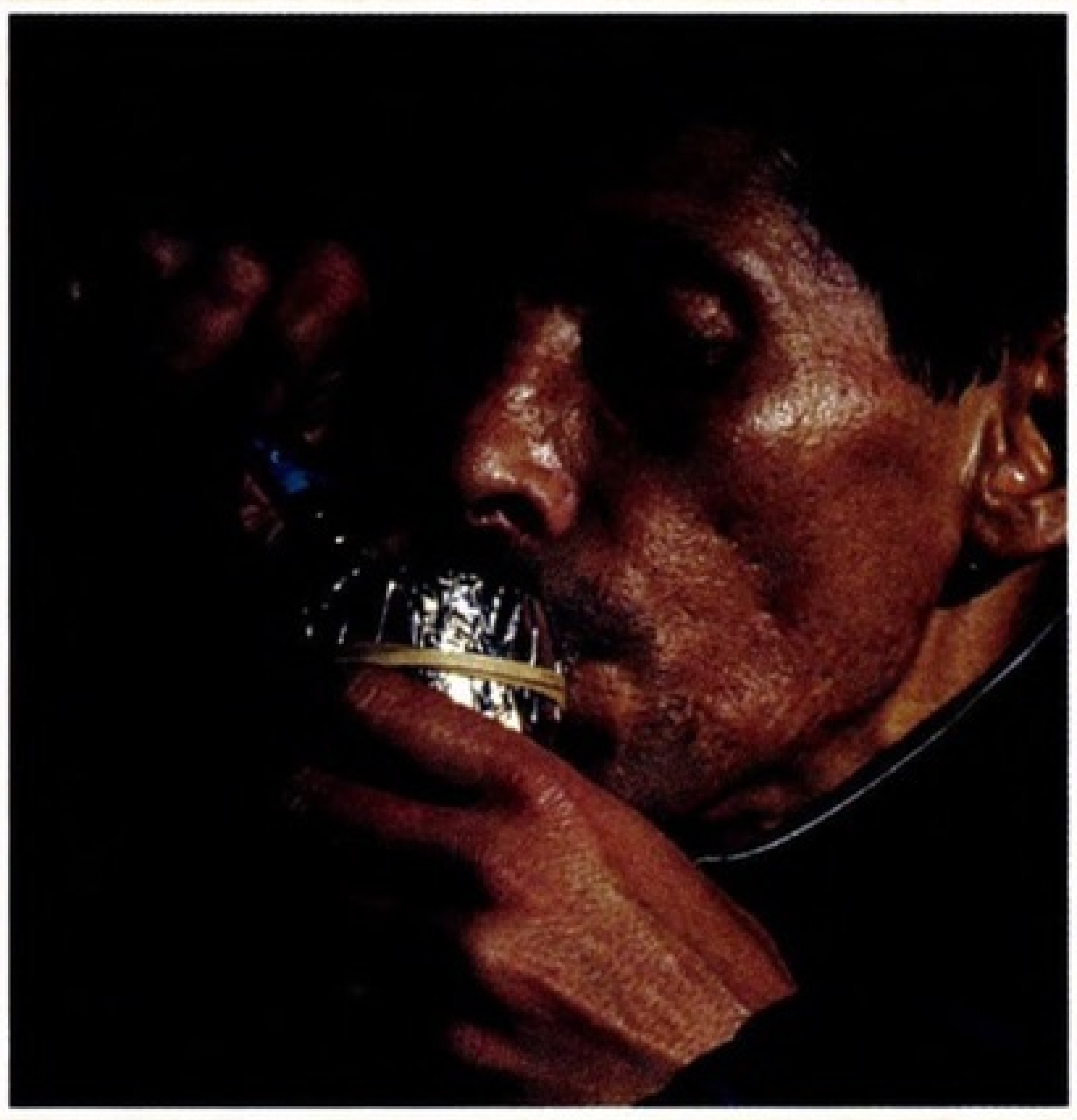
Curiosities

QUESTIONS THAT HAVE ALWAYS INTRIGUED YOU ABOUT THE WORLD WILL APPEAR IN THIS, YOUR SECTION, AND BE ANSWERED BY OTHER READERS. PLEASE ADDRESS YOUR ANSWERS AND QUESTIONS TO 'CURIOSITIES'.

If 'crack' cocaine is more potent than cocaine powder why is it cheaper?

● Cocaine comes mainly in two forms: as cocaine hydrochloride powder and as non-ionized free-base cocaine rocks, known as 'crack'.

Originally drug traders turned cocaine hydrochloride into 'crack' because more doses could be sold per quantity of cocaine hydrochloride and so it was more profitable. It became customary to smuggle cocaine in this form and soon most dealers began to sell 'crack' rather than hydrochloride. Demand did not increase markedly, but supply did and the price went down as result. Now demand has grown a bit – due to the lower prices – but it will have to increase a lot before the price of crack rises to that of hydrochloride.


FRANCES LANG / FORMAT

Crack has now outpaced cocaine powder.

Dr J Barrett
London, England

What is the origin of the expression 'a different kettle of fish'?

● A 'kettle' is, in origin, any deep pan for boiling food in water. A fish-kettle is a large, two-handed, oval saucepan, long enough to take a salmon full-length. In Scotland parties were held at the riverside to cook and eat salmon and so a 'pretty kettle of fish' ironically refers to a picnic that gets out of hand and a 'different kettle of fish' is a separate affair, like 'a whole new ball game'. See Brewer, *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable,* fourteenth edition.

Alison Adcock
Oxford, England

Which country has been under colonial rule for the longest time?

● What about the Kurds? They have been subject to someone else forever. If they ever achieved a nation-state, wouldn't they automatically win the title? One may also consider the Moorish colonization of the Iberian peninsula, which lasted almost 700 years.

And what about the countries that came under papal domination? The papal states (aka 'the Roman Catholic Church' or the 'Holy Roman Empire') terrorized many parts of Europe from about 800 AD to the end of the nineteenth century. With an openly proclaimed program of world domination, pursued though an ideological terror campaign of torture and brainwashing, this 'country' dominated many governments in Europe until they were able to free themselves from its clutches.

Greg Erwin
Aylmer, Canada

What is the title and publisher of JB Priestley's novel about two men who founded the 'Institute of Imagistics'?

● It's *The Image Men* published by Heinemann, UK.

Jean Unwin
Seascale, England

AWAITING YOUR ANSWERS

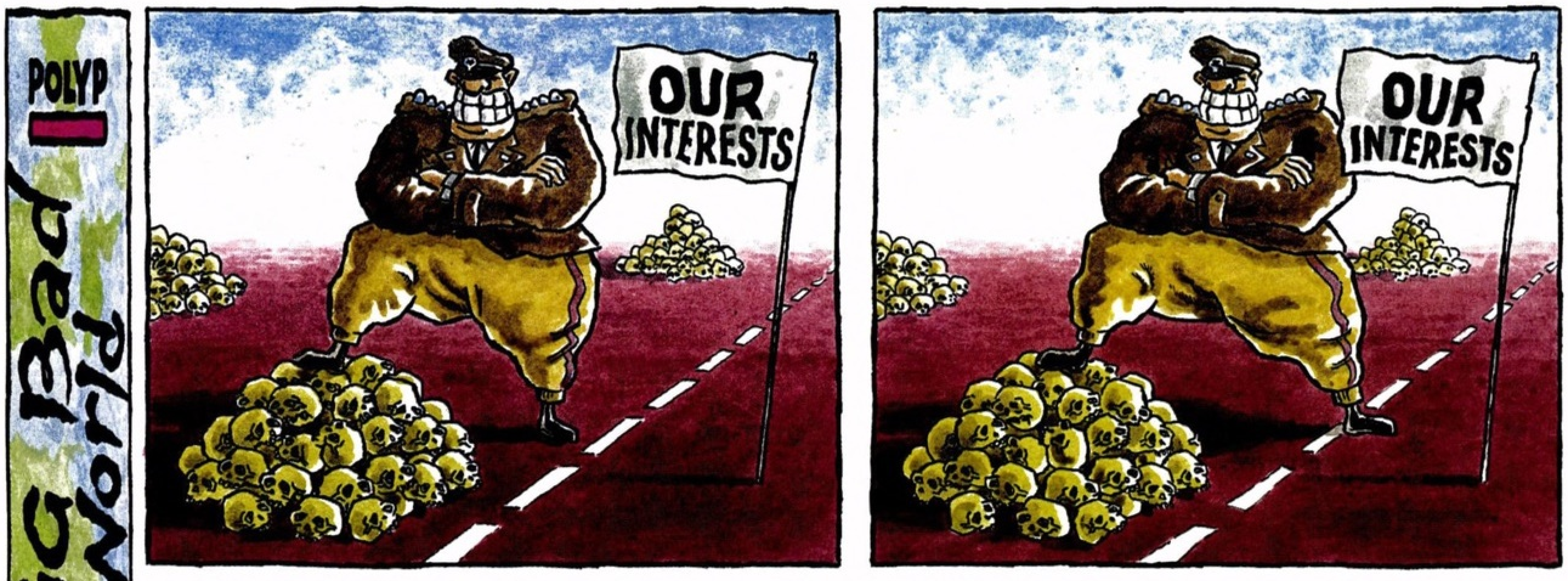
Has anyone calculated the extent to which Britain's former colonies helped make Britain a 'developed' nation? What has been their economic impact over the centuries?

David Salter
Cardiff, Wales

Where does the Eastern Hemisphere end and the Western begin? Where is the vertical Equator? Is this just another variation on the First-Third World, North-South division? If so where do Turkey and Mexico belong?

Claire Thomas
Ankara, Turkey

IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS OR ANSWERS PLEASE SEND THEM TO **CURIOSITIES, NEW INTERNATIONALIST, 55 RECTORY ROAD, OXFORD OX4 1BW, UK,** OR TO YOUR LOCAL NI OFFICE (SEE INSIDE FRONT COVER FOR ADDRESSES).


POLYP
big Bad World
OUR INTERESTS
A FIRM LEADER OF A TROUBLED COUNTRY WITH WHOM WE'LL GLADLY DO BUSINESS AND WITH WHOM WE HAVE NO QUARREL
SELL HIM SOME MORE ARMS
OUR INTERESTS
A VICIOUS POWER-CRAZED MEGALOMANIAC DICTATOR WHO HAS BRUTALIZED HIS OWN PEOPLE AND WHO MUST BE STOPPED
SEND IN THE TROOPS

Virtual virtues

Is 'virtual reality' an electronic narcotic for computer-addicts – or a door to reality? **William Kelly** and **Patrick Kinsella** look at it from the point of view of disabled people.

PHOTOMONTAGE: ALAN HUGHES

VIRTUAL Reality is based on the fact that humans do not directly experience reality. What we receive is information through the senses which is interpreted by the brain as reality. Information therefore is what reality is for us; and if we can tailor information to the brain we can generate a reality which is indistinguishable from the 'real' thing.

Opponents fear that the new technology may end up serving as a mere escape from reality becoming, as it were, an electronic narcotic. So it is important to state what Virtual Reality actually is. It is a computer-generated mind-space with input and output devices that enable the user to interact with it and experience it. What is in that space depends on the programmes in the computer's memory. These may be lifelike or fantasy objects. They can be anything the imagination can conceive, ranging from important files to harmless baubles – you can play tennis or fly through galaxies.

The input and output devices currently in use are gloves that sense the movements of hand, fingers and arm; body suits that monitor body movements; Head Mounted Displays (HMDs) that show the three-dimensional environment; and stereophones that relay three-dimensional sound. In a 3D 'virtual world' what you do and how you do it depends on a hand gesture, or a nod, or even a sound. It is this enablement technology that is the focus of much serious research geared to people with disabilities. You do not use a computer: you wear it. The implications for those with physical or mental disabilities are tremendous.

In the 'virtual office' a severely disabled worker can enjoy equal status with anyone else. Blind people or those with sight deficiencies will be able to relate to information more audibly or tactually. Deaf people will be able to manipulate information visually. Voice-recognition and speech-synthesis devices are already available. Walter J Greenleaf of Greenleaf Medical Systems, California, has created a prototype using a Dataglove and a Macintosh computer to control a telephone receptionist station. Using hand gestures the receptionist can instruct the computer to answer and route telephone calls or to activate pre-recorded messages. This highlights the specific nature of Virtual Reality. In cyberspace one is not merely a voyeur but an actor. Disabled people have the opportunity to accomplish tasks and have experiences which would otherwise be unattainable.

For those with severe disabilities, systems like BioMuse are being developed that use the biological signals generated by the eyes, the muscles and the brain. For example the user's eye movements can manipulate the cursor on the screen. The point to which she directs her gaze is the point to which the cursor moves. In this way she can navigate her way around the menu of a word processor. By using additional input of jaw muscle tension she can write complete documents. In the same way she can move through a three-dimensional Virtual Reality space using muscle tension to access files or dialogue with objects in general. Advances in this field are now centring on brainwave detection devices that will allow the user to interface with the computer simply by thinking. The combination of electroencephalogram (EEG) pattern recognition and muscle movements will greatly help disabled people use new technology.

People with sight impairment can have the visual content of their screens tailored so as to be visible whether by altering colours of objects or accentuating borders. Audio-based games are being developed that will enable blind people to interact with fantasy worlds every bit as exciting as those enjoyed by the sighted.

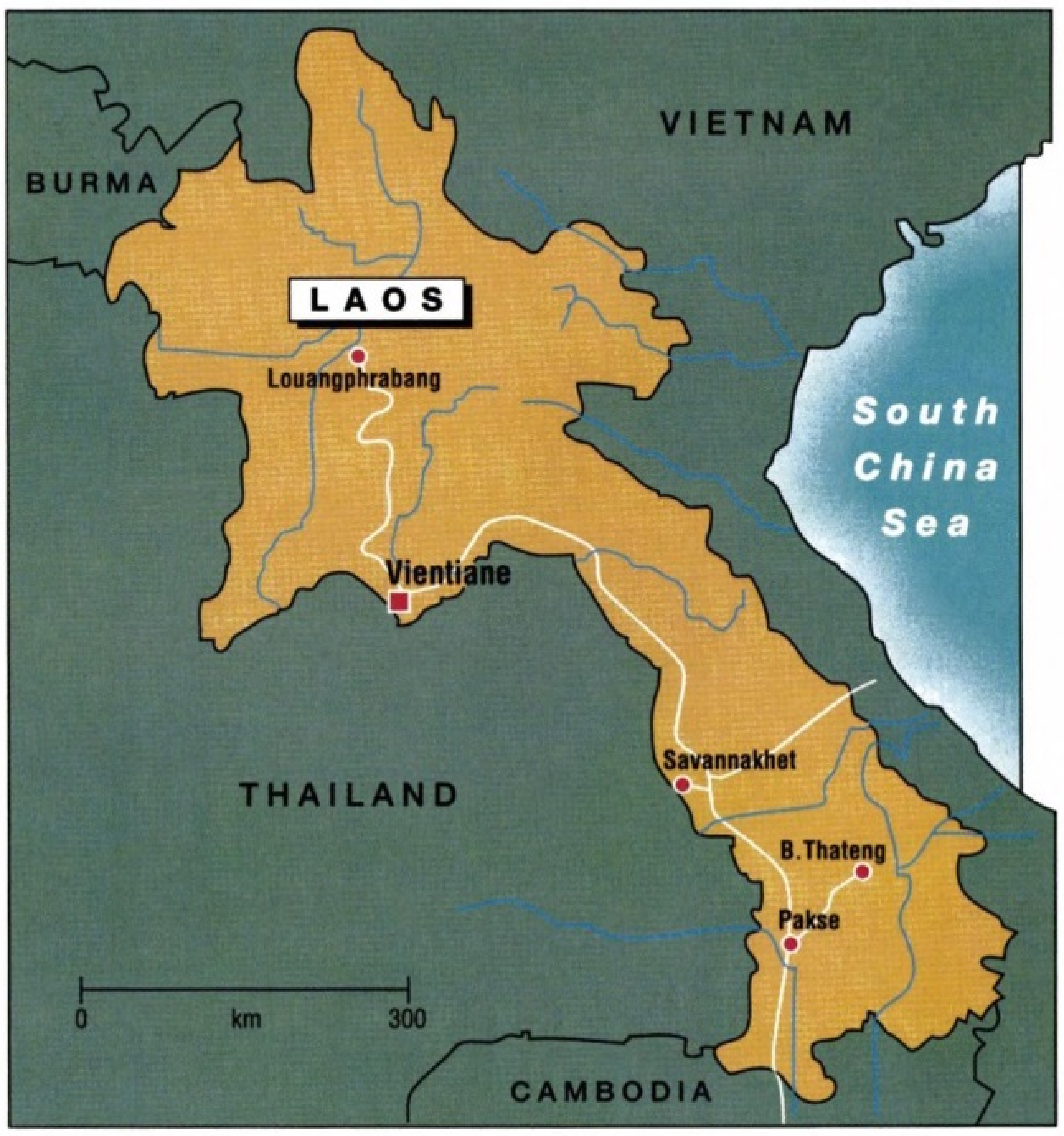
Researchers are working on many other projects that will enable disabled people to express themselves more easily. A system called SLARTI, for example, will translate sign language into any spoken language. By bending fingers or wiggling a stick in the mouth, a disabled person can learn and play a musical instrument. Using other techniques for representing sounds visually she can be taught to see musical notation. Such sounds can also be rendered as tactile stimuli, so that the disabled person can create musical forms that are beyond the abilities of the so-called 'able-bodied' person. Meanwhile, psychologists are also looking to Virtual Reality to help treat mental afflictions such as depression and phobias of all types.

These and other developments promise to open up the world to those who hitherto have been barred from what the majority take for granted. If you look at it from this point of view Virtual Reality looks not like an escape from reality but a way into it. ■

William Kelly is a writer and **Patrick Kinsella** is a researcher specializing in Virtual Reality. They live in Derry, Northern Ireland.

Country profile

Laos



THE small South-East Asian nation of Laos remains ravaged by the two million tonnes of bombs dropped on it during the US-Vietnam War – more explosives than the US dumped on Germany in World War Two. Live tennis-ball-size bombs, known in Laos as 'bombies', continue to kill farmers who hit them while hoeing and also take the lives of children who mistake them for toys.

The bombs failed to destroy the legendary Ho Chi Minh Trail which ran through Laos. This secret, jungle-covered route allowed next-door North Vietnam to supply its guerrillas who were assaulting US-backed South Vietnam. Laos won its war against the US and its client regime in 1975, but the victors' communist policies inspired 10 per cent of the population to flee. Many still refuse to come back until the communists are ousted.

This may be a one-party state but there is no political personality cult in Laos. The elderly leaders are instead secretive, unseen and silent, almost as if they were still clandestine guerrillas fighting from remote caves. Ironically they now work in US-built offices which were abandoned when Vientiane, the capital, fell to Pathet Lao guerrillas in 1975.

Charming, sleepy Vientiane rests on the northern shore of the languid Mekong River across from Thailand. The two nations recently built a 'Friendship Bridge' to span the river for the first time, amid hopes that they are finally solving their troublesome border spats. As a result of the bridge, Vientiane is bracing itself for future shock, including the problems of traffic jams, pollution, AIDS and other woes it has hitherto escaped. Laotians are hoping, however, that the benefits of intellectual, cultural and commercial exchanges will outweigh the negatives.

Laos lacks a sea coast or a railroad. It is also blanketed by gorgeous but steep mountains, which mean, for good or ill, that development will be slow however much foreign aid or investment pours in. Nevertheless Laos is keen to shake off its isolation and integrate with the rest of the world. Dazzled by hopes of earning millions of dollars in fast foreign cash – and shocked by the sudden drying-up of aid and trade with the former Soviet Union – the fabled 'land of a million elephants' wants instead to become the land of a million deals. Gold, minerals, oil, gems, tourist sites, banking, transportation, construction: you name it and it's probably up for grabs. Some foreigners see Laos as the best place in Indochina to make money with the least possible risk: liberal foreign-investment laws were recently unveiled and the economy was restructured towards capitalism. The economy is already into its second period of structural adjustment as a condition of a World Bank loan.

Politically, however, Laos has vowed to remain a one-party nation, rejecting multiparty democracy. Those accused of hostility to the regime are still liable to be detained for long periods.

Richard S Ehrlich

AT A GLANCE

STEPHANIE DINKINS / CAMERA PRESS

Leader President Nouhak Phoumsavan; Prime Minister Khamtay Siphandone

Economy GDP per capita $220 *(US $22,240)*

Monetary unit: Kip

Main exports: Electricity, wood products, coffee, tin

Main imports: Food, fuel oil, consumer and manufactured goods

External debt: $1.1 billion (1990 estimate)

Agriculture accounts for 60% of GDP and employs 85% of the workforce. Production of tin concentrate is the main industry; foreign companies are mainly interested in minerals such as coal, iron, gold and gems. Laos is the world's third largest opium producer.

People 4.4 million. Population growth rate 2.9% per annum.

Health Infant mortality 98 per 1,000 live births *(US 9 per 1,000)*.

Culture Lao 50%, Phoutheung (Kha) 15%, tribal Thai 20%, Meo, Hmong, Yao and other 15%.

Religion: Buddhist 85%, animist and other 15%.

Languages: Lao (official), ethnic languages, French (the former colonial language).

·**Sources:** *Asian Development Bank; World Bank; World Health Organization; State of the World's Children 1994; Third World Guide 93/94; Asia & Pacific Review 1993/94; UNESCAP; and government statistics.*

Last profiled in October 1984

NI star rating

EXCELLENT	★★★★★
GOOD	★★★★
FAIR	★★★
POOR	★★
APPALLING	★

STAR RATINGS

INCOME DISTRIBUTION ★★
Lowland Lao are more wealthy. But most people live at subsistence level. There are few resources to distribute.
1984 ★★★

SELF-RELIANCE ★★
Usually self-sufficient in food but primitive infrastructure means almost all manufactured goods are imported.
1984 ★★

POSITION OF WOMEN ★★★
Traditional Lao society keeps women subservient to men. But female education and employment in cities has improved.
1984 ★★★

LITERACY ★★★★
92% for men, 76% for women – a huge improvement since the Revolution.
1984★★

FREEDOM ★
No freedom of speech or dissent. Exchanging ideas with foreigners is difficult.
1984 ★★

LIFE EXPECTANCY ★★
51 years. Compares with a regional average of 67 and the US's 76.
1984 ★

POLITICS

NI ASSESSMENT ★★
Shocked by the collapse of its former allies and trading partners in the Soviet bloc, Laos is opening its economic doors to capitalism while keeping the communist political lid firmly on. The worst of both worlds could result.

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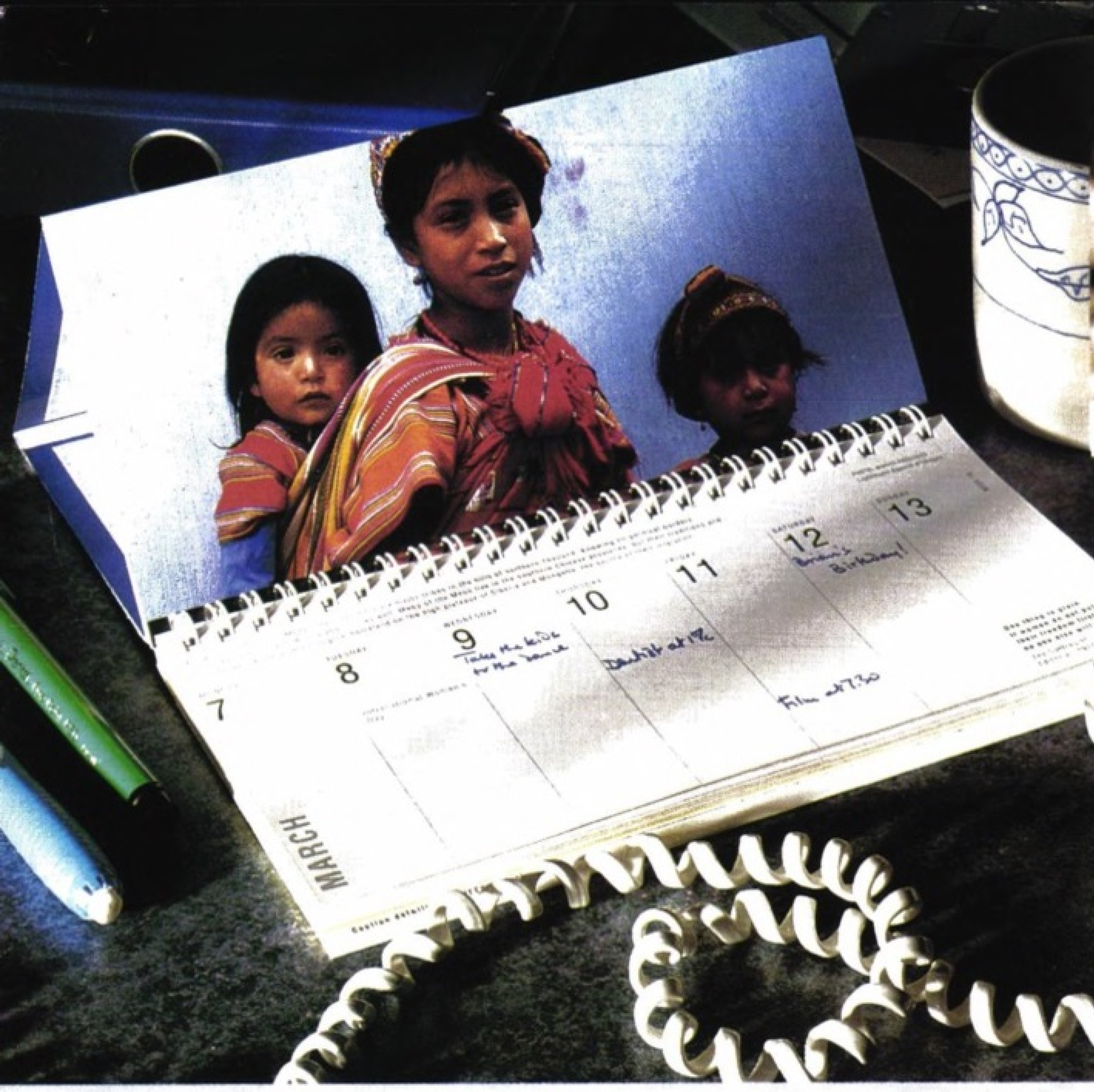
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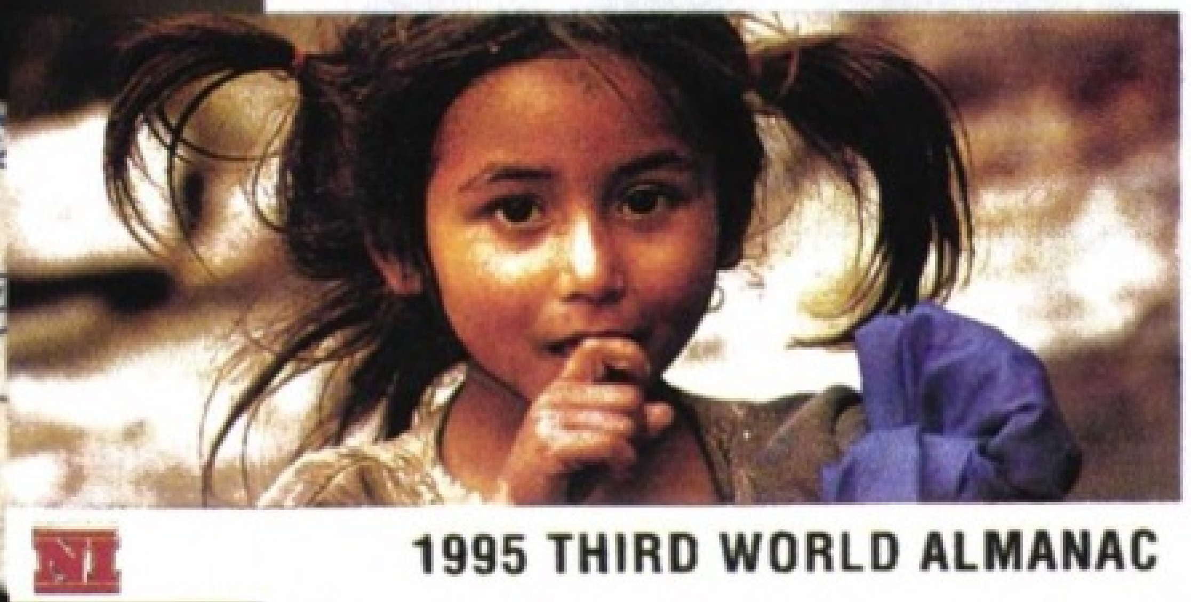
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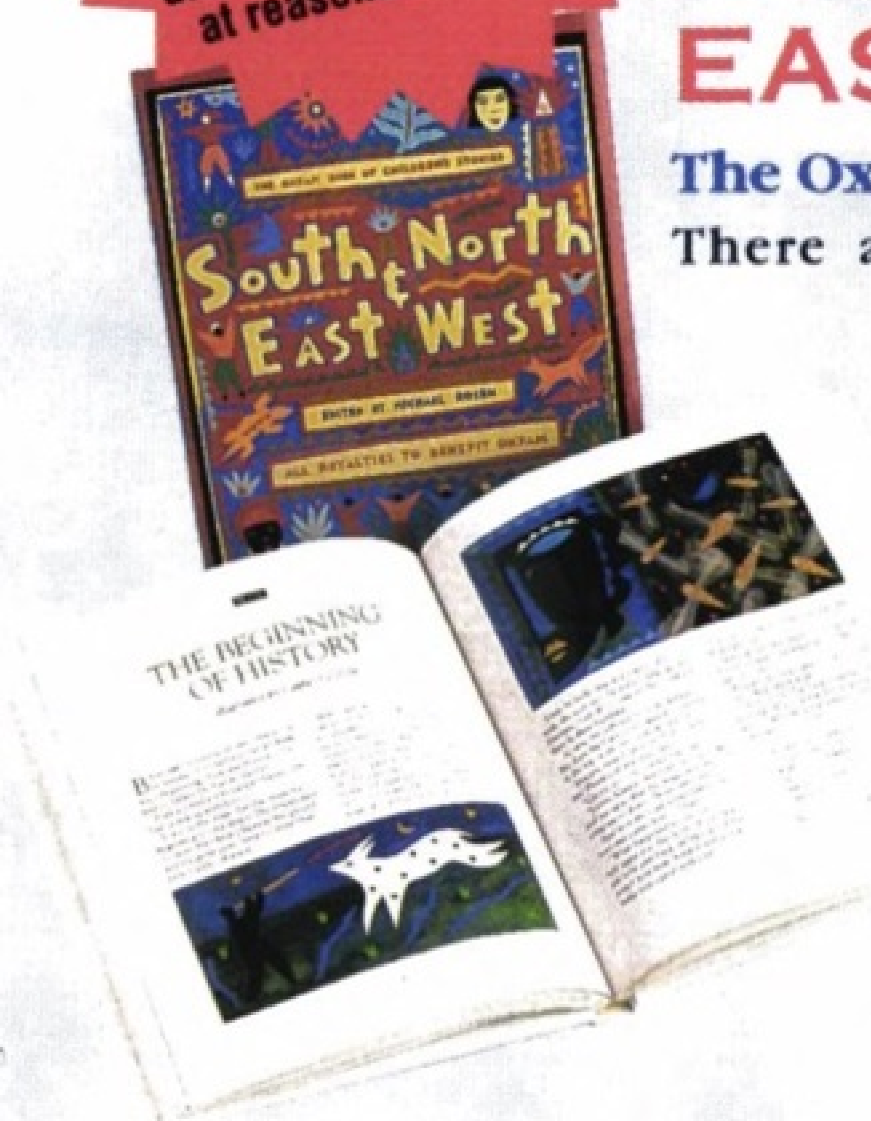
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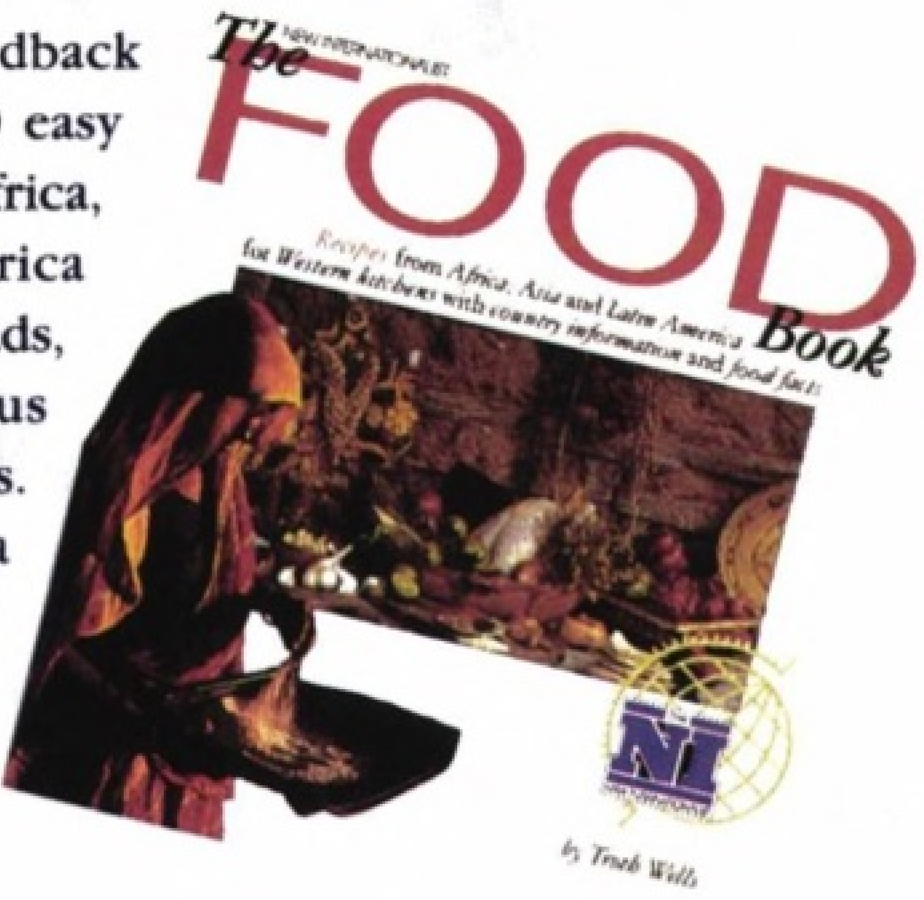
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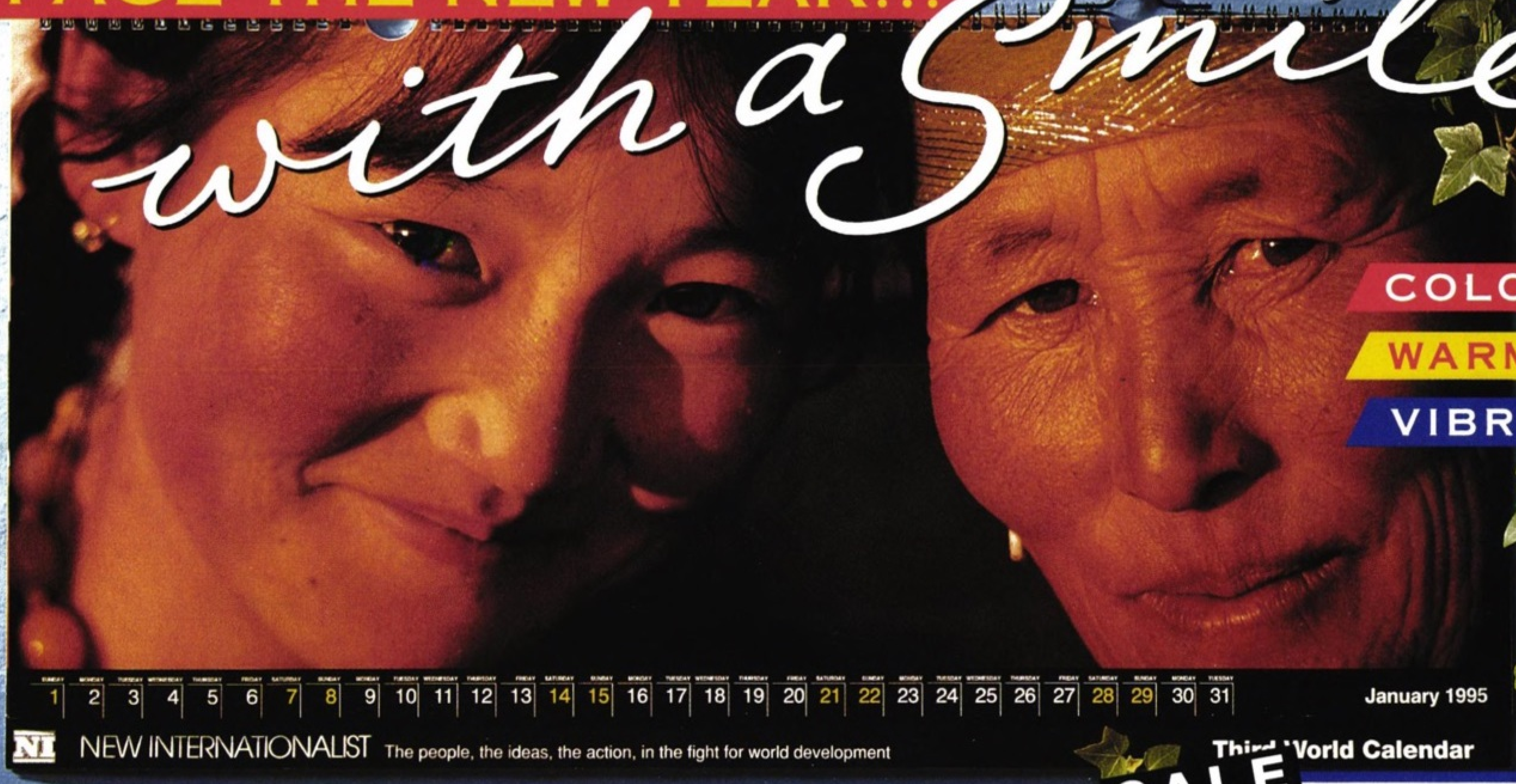
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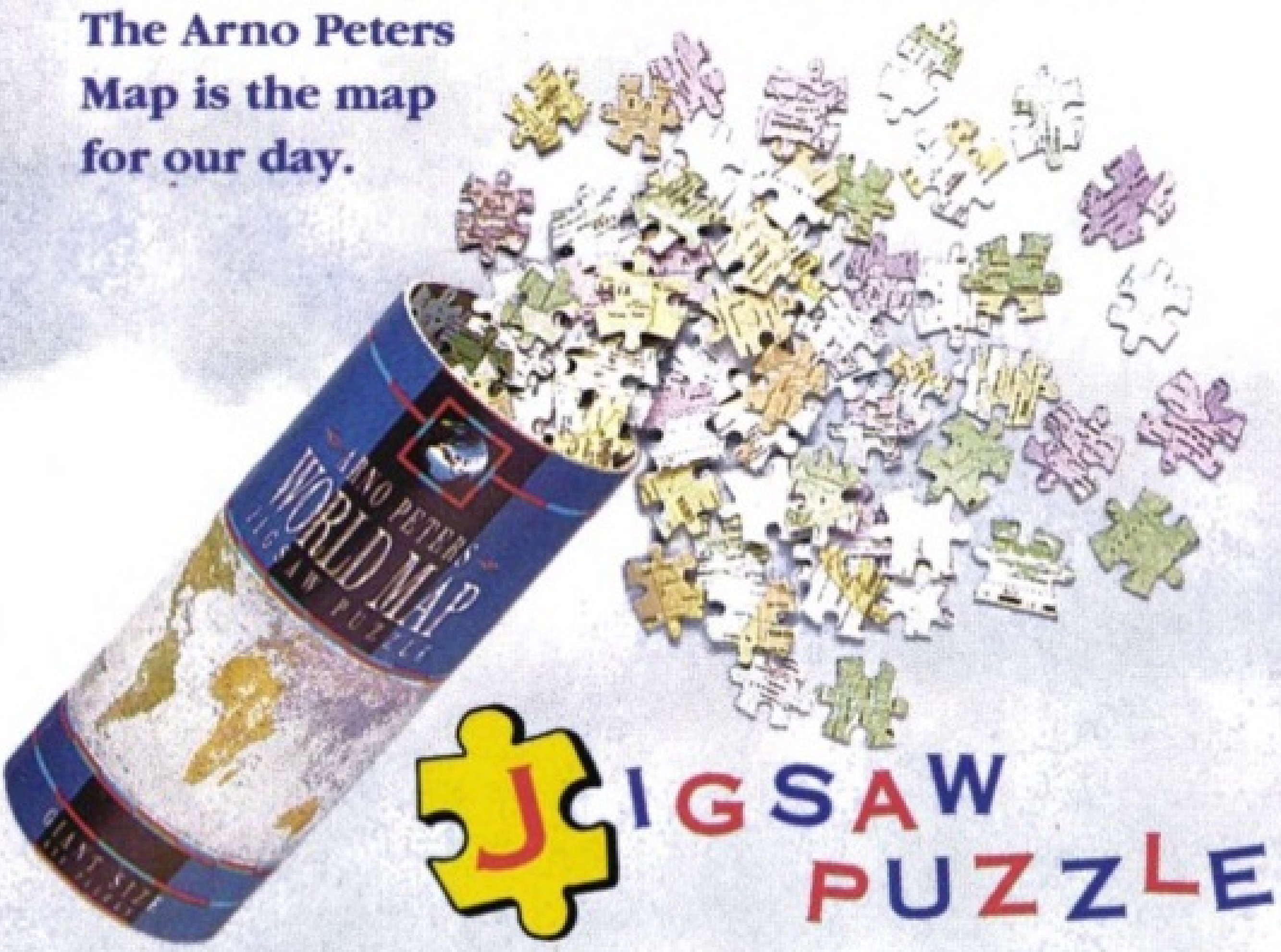
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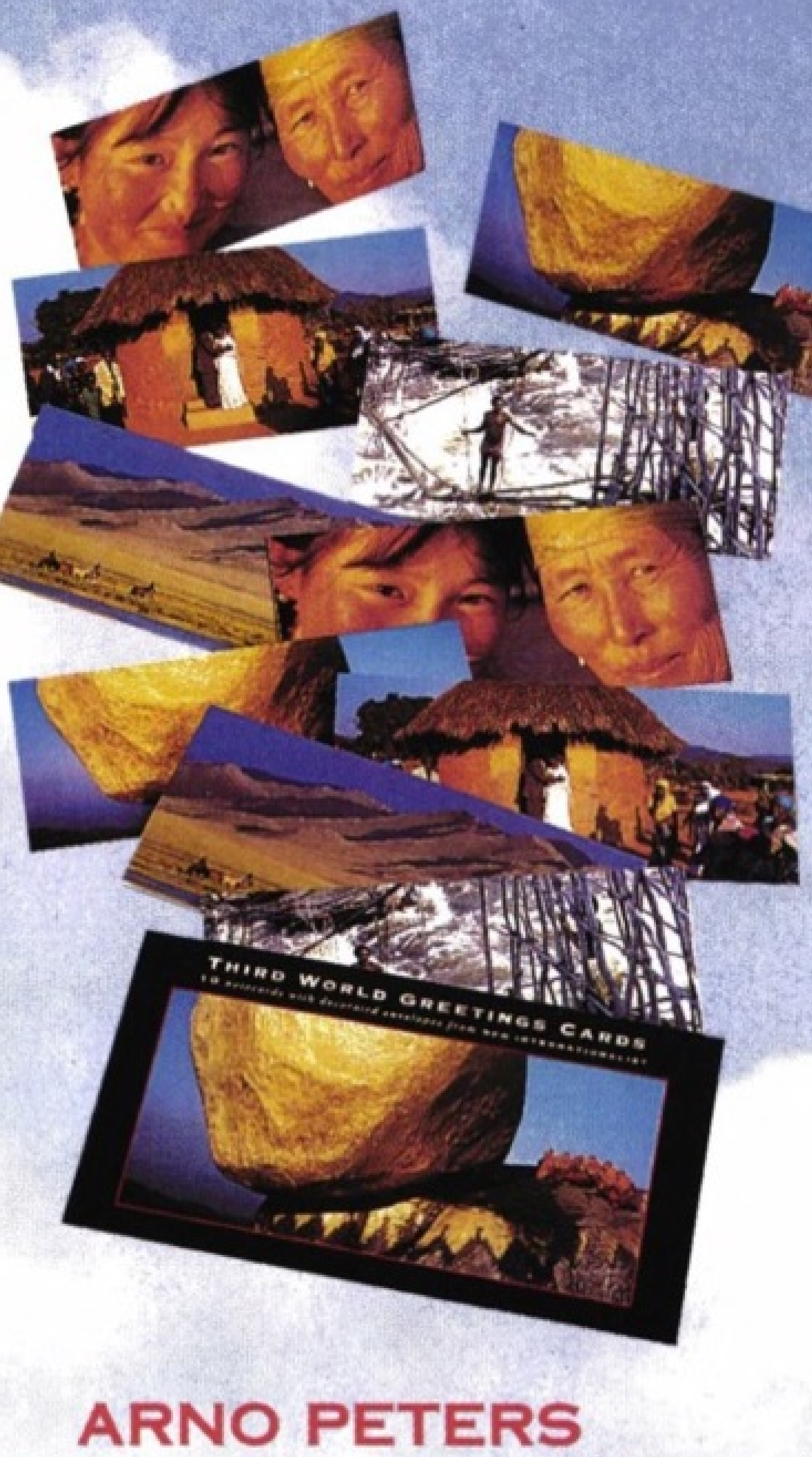
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